The Testaments

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARGARET ATWOOD

Margaret Atwood was born the middle child of three to her entomologist father and dietician mother in 1939. Due to her father's study of forest-dwelling insects, Atwood and her family spent much of their time in rural Quebec and traveling between Ottawa and Toronto. Although Atwood was an avid writer from the age of six, penning poems and small plays, she did not attend school full-time until age 12. By 16, Atwood was determined to be a professional writer, and after graduating high school in Leaside, Toronto in 1957, studied at the University of Toronto, where she began publishing her work in the university's literary journal. In 1961, Atwood moved to Radcliffe College (Harvard's corollary institution for women, since Harvard was male-only at the time) where she earned a master's degree and began working on her doctorate, though she abandoned her dissertation midway through. Atwood published her first work in 1961, a book of poetry that won the E.J. Pratt Medal. Throughout the 1960s, Atwood continued to write while working as a college lecturer at several universities in Canada, publishing a number of popular novels, articles, and poetry volumes into the 1970s, several of which won awards. It was not until the 1980s, however, that Atwood's career truly took off, particularly with the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1985, winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award, and *Cat's Eye* in 1988. Atwood continued to write successful novels, though her next most notable achievement came in 2000 with the publication of *The Blind Assassin*, which won the Man Booker Prize and was widely lauded by critics. In 2017, *The Handmaid's Tale* was made into a TV series, which Atwood advises on, and in 2019 she published *The Testaments*, the long-awaited sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Margaret Atwood admitted in several interviews that the presidential election of Donald Trump in 2016 and the political divisiveness that plagued the United States in the following years influenced the writing of *The Testaments*, though she flatly denies that America has yet adopted any sort of significant authoritarianism resembling Gilead. A greater historical influence seem to be the New England Puritans of the late 1600s—Gilead is described by Professor Pieixoto as a "Puritan theocracy" in the novel—whose leadership believed that they ruled on behalf of God and were thus infallible, instituting extremely strict moral codes across every level of society. This heightened view of their own power, emphasis on strict morality, and extremely conservative ideas about women and sexuality led to the infamous Salem Witch Trials in 1692 and 1693, in which 20 men and women viewed as immoral degenerates (several of the women had sex outside of marriage and spurned religious tradition) were executed under the pretense of either being witches themselves or conspiring with witches. Margaret Atwood has also noted the Soviet Union's NKVD, a notoriously brutal police force that carried out secret deportations and executions in the name of national security throughout the 20th century, as additional inspiration for Gilead's authoritarian practices.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* are works of speculative fiction, envisioning what the world might look like within the next century, as opposed to science fiction which looks farther afield. Atwood herself, amidst her more than 50 published books, has written several speculative novels herself including the *MaddAddam Trilogy*, which envisions the near future of a world unrestrained in its experimentation with genetic editing. *The Testaments* and its warnings of a dystopian near future takes its place alongside George Orwell's *1984*, which pictures America as part of a massive totalitarian state (Atwood has listed Orwell's speculative fiction as a major influence on her own). It also shares similarities with the arguably more sinister *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, which explores how a near-future society might control its citizens not through violence or authoritarian rule, but rather by pacifying them through drugs, sex, and easy pleasures. Atwood has also listed Madeline Albright's historical compendium *Fascism: A Warning* and Tim Snyder's *Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* as major inspirations, giving her the historical basis on which many of *The Testaments*' events are founded.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Testaments
- **When Written:** 2018-2019
- **Where Written:** Toronto, Canada
- **When Published:** September 10, 2019
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Dystopian, Speculative Fiction
- **Setting:** Gilead, formerly the United States, in the mid-21st century
- **Climax:** Agnes and Nicole arrive on the shore of Canada.
- **Antagonist:** Aunt Vidala, Commander Judd
- **Point of View:** First person alternating between Aunt Lydia,

Agnes Jemima / Aunt Victoria, and Nicole / Daisy / Jade

EXTRA CREDIT

A Dark Past. Although fans of *The Handmaid's Tale* have been clamoring for a sequel for years, Atwood did not feel like she had the strength to pick up the main character, Offred's, narration again, since it was simply too dark. It was only once she settled on the idea of setting the sequel 15 years after the first story and using different narrators that she was able to revisit Gilead.

Modern Inspiration. Although Atwood does not believe that the United States is anything like the authoritarian state of Gilead, *The Testaments* is peppered with concepts that have dominated headlines since 2016, such as climate change and fake news.

PLOT SUMMARY

The story takes place in Gilead, a "Puritan theocracy" established in place of the United States in the 21st Century, previously described in *The Handmaid's Tale*. It interweaves narratives by Aunt Lydia, Agnes, and Nicole (who is initially known as Daisy).

Aunt Lydia, the most powerful Aunt in Gilead and one of its architects, writes that she is nearing the end of her life, and already many want her dead. However, she intends to take the entire country down with her when she dies. For years she has been compiling damning information about Gilead's leadership and she is preparing to release it to the world. Her rival Aunt Vidala is constantly scheming against her, and Lydia needs to survive long enough to smuggle the information out of Gilead. Lydia spends her time planning and counteracting Vidala's schemes, often by blackmailing or coercing other powerful people. She often meets with Commander Judd, one of Gilead's most powerful officials, who is trying to uncover a secret traitor in their midst who is slowly leaking intel to an anti-Gilead resistance movement called Mayday. He does not suspect that the traitor is Lydia herself. Lydia also recalls her past life as a judge, and her days in Gilead's founding when she was arrested, tortured, and then co-opted into designing much of Gilead's social structure, especially as it pertains to women. Lydia complied, but even from Gilead's formation began plotting her revenge.

As a young child in Gilead, Agnes enjoyed her days with her adoptive (though Agnes does not know it yet) mother Tabitha, Commander Kyle's wife. As the only child of an elite family, Agnes is well cared for, but she is taught to fear men's powerful sexual urges and thus her own sexual allure, even as a very young girl. These happy days end when Tabitha dies and Commander Kyle remarries a widow named Paula. Agnes soon discovers that Tabitha was not her real mother; her real mother is an escaped Handmaid, though no one knows what became of her. A few years later, Commander Kyle gets a Handmaid named Ofkyle to bear him a child since Paula, like most women, is infertile. Ofkyle becomes pregnant and gives birth, though when complications set in, the doctor cuts her open to retrieve the baby, killing her. Agnes is immensely disturbed that Ofkyle never gets to choose whether she lives or dies. When Agnes is entering puberty and marriageable age, she and her friend Becka are put into marital preparatory school and will soon be forced to marry much older men. They are both terrified by the prospect of marrying strangers and being forced to have sex with them, in part because they both have been victims of sexual abuse by Becka's father, Dr. Grove. Becka is so mortified by the idea that she slashes her wrist, trying to commit suicide. Paramedics save her life, and Lydia offers Becka the option of becoming an Aunt instead, which means she will live in Ardua Hall and never marry. Becka accepts with gratitude, and Lydia notes that she may bank on that gratitude in the future. Meanwhile, Agnes is engaged to be married to Commander Judd. She considers trying to commit suicide like Becka, but lacks the resolve. Mere days before she is to be married, Lydia slyly suggests that Agnes can become an Aunt like Becka and herself and thus be spared from marriage, an offer which Agnes accepts. As Aunts, Becka and Agnes are allowed to live together and learn to read. Through reading the Bible and discovering criminal evidence against various people in Gilead's leadership, they both realize that Gilead is overwhelmingly corrupt and rotten to the core.

In Toronto, Canada, Daisy lives with her parents Neil and Melanie, who run a secondhand clothes store called The Clothes Hound, though Daisy always feels strangely distant from them. On Daisy's sixteenth birthday, a car bomb at the store kills both Neil and Melanie, and Melanie's friend Ada takes Daisy on the run, where she learns that she is actually Baby Nicole, a famous child who was smuggled out of Gilead when she was an infant. Neil and Melanie were not her true parents, but rather operatives for the anti-Gilead resistance movement Mayday, which is why they were murdered by Gilead agents who are now hunting for Nicole herself. Nicole's real parents are alive, but in hiding. Ada introduces Nicole to Mayday operatives Garth and Elijah, and they together explain that they have an unknown source in Gilead who promises that they have enough damning information to topple Gilead's regime, but they need a way to get the information out to Canada. The source proposes that they send Nicole into Gilead, posing as a new convert, and then the source will give her the cache of information and smuggle her back out of the country. Nicole is scared of this plot, but is swept into it by the others, since this is their best chance of defeating Gilead. Garth teaches Nicole how to fight and survive and then takes her out to live on the streets with him for a week, until Gilead missionaries find them and take Nicole (who is now operating

under the name Jade) back with them to Gilead. Jade is brought to Ardua Hall and placed under the care of Becka and Agnes, who are supposed to make a proper convert out of her. However, Jade is boisterous and unruly and does not blend in well to Gilead's somber and modest culture.

When Jade is getting anxious, unsure how she is supposed to find the source, Lydia reveals herself to her and brings both Becka and Agnes into her plan. She reveals that Agnes and Nicole are half-sisters, daughters of the same escaped Handmaid. Lydia tells all of them that for the good of the women and children in Gilead, they must help it to fall. Lydia implants a piece of microdot film containing all of the criminal evidence she has gathered on Gilead's government over several decades into Nicole's arm. Her plan is for Agnes and Nicole to leave Gilead for Canada under the pretense of being new missionaries and with Nicole posing as Becka, while Becka herself remains in Gilead in Nicole's place, hiding out in a retreat center. This will effectively require Becka to sacrifice herself for the mission and her friends, but Becka agrees to do so. However, Commander Judd and his men invade Ardua Hall, believing that the traitor is somewhere inside, which forces Agnes and Nicole to leave prematurely. There is no time for Becka to be protected from harm, so she hides on the roof and drowns herself in the cistern, rather than allowing herself to be captured and interrogated. While Agnes and Nicole are fleeing, they are discovered by Aunt Vidala, who realizes that a plot is afoot, but Nicole punches her in the chest so hard that her heart stops and she goes into a temporary coma. Agnes and Nicole travel on, passing through checkpoints as missionaries and being smuggled through New Hampshire and Maine into Canada by a series of individuals who hate Gilead and cooperate with Mayday. Though they nearly drown, Agnes and Nicole reach the shores of Canada and are picked up by Ada, Garth, and other Mayday operatives. The data is taken from Nicole's arm and passed on to national news, which broadcasts it around the world. Agnes and Nicole finally meet their mother, who has been in hiding in Canada since they were both young children. Lydia ends her narrative knowing that her mission has succeeded, though she has now been discovered and intends to commit suicide with a morphine injection.

In the epilogue, a historian named Pieixoto speaks at a conference in 2197 and confirms that following the release of the damning information, Gilead fell to international pressure and local rebellions. He also suggests that Agnes and Nicole's mother was Offred, the main character of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Aunt Lydia – Aunt Lydia is the most powerful Aunt in Gilead, the leader of Ardua Hall, one of the Founders, and one of the novel's three narrators. Although Lydia seems to be the archetype of power and oppressive control in Gilead, her narrative reveals that she has secretly been planning Gilead's destruction from the beginning, even when she was helping to design its social systems and moral codes. While Lydia is responsible for numerous brutal executions, she has also been secretly compiling evidence of horrible crimes committed by every level of Gilead's leadership, which ultimately causes the regime's downfall. She is an anonymous informant for the Mayday resistance operation, providing them with evidence that helps them to smuggle refugee women out of Gilead to safety in Canada. On the sly, Lydia also rescues women in Gilead such as Agnes and Becka from arranged marriages, and she brings sexual predators such as Dr. Grove to justice. When Nicole and Ada go into hiding, Lydia communicates that she has damning information that will destroy Gilead so long as Mayday can get Nicole to her safely. From Ardua Hall, Lydia orchestrates Nicole and Agnes's escape to Canada (at the cost of Becka's life) providing Agnes with freedom and Mayday with the ultimate weapon to combat Gilead, even though Lydia makes a martyr of herself in doing so. Lydia thus occupies a complicated and morally ambiguous role: she is one of the terrible regime's most powerful and feared figures, but she nonetheless uses that power and mythic image to slowly undermine and ultimately destroy it. This position requires her to always maintain a careful balance of power, particularly as a woman in a militaristic patriarchal regime, and she often plays both sides of a conflict against each other, angling for her own surreptitious advantage.

Agnes Jemima / Aunt Victoria – Agnes is Nicole's half-sister, the adopted daughter of an elite family in Gilead, and one of the three narrators. Agnes grows up as the legal daughter of Commander Kyle and his wife Tabitha, whom she initially believes to be her biological mother. Although she has a happy enough childhood, Agnes is terrified—as all young girls in Gilead are taught to be—of accidentally enticing any man to succumb to his overwhelming sexual urges and take advantage of her, simply by existing and having a woman's body. This fear of men's urges and her own body's wicked potential is reinforced when Dr. Grove sexually abuses her. When Agnes enters puberty, her parents arrange for her to be engaged to Commander Judd, a prospect which horrifies her. She even contemplates suicide like her friend Becka attempted, but does not have the resolve to follow through. Aunt Lydia rescues Agnes from marriage by allowing her to become an Aunt and live in Ardua Hall as Aunt Victoria, which also means that Agnes learns to read and write. However, as Agnes begins to read the Bible, she realizes that Gilead's idea of God and life and virtue does not fit with the Bible, prompting her to question her faith. At the same time, files of criminal evidence against Gilead's leadership start coming to her anonymously, leading her to realize that Gilead's government and leadership are not pious and virtuous as they claim, but utterly corrupt. When Nicole,

operating under the name Jade, enters Ardua Hall, Aunt Lydia reveals to Agnes that Jade is not only Baby Nicole, but her own half-sister. Lydia thus enlists Agnes in their plan to get Nicole and the damning information out of Gilead. Agnes and Nicole pose as missionaries and make their escape into Canada, where Agnes finally meets her long-lost biological mother, the former Handmaid known as Offred.

Nicole / Daisy / Jade – Nicole is Agnes's half-sister, the grown version of Baby Nicole, and the third narrator. After being smuggled out of Gilead as an infant, Nicole grows up in Canada believing that her name is Daisy, that her birth parents are Neil and Melanie, and that she is just like any other teenager. However, after Gilead operatives kill Neil and Melanie with a car bomb, Melanie's friend Ada takes Nicole underground and explains that Neil and Melanie were not her biological parents. They were actually Mayday operatives who adopted her, and Nicole herself is the daughter of a Handmaid and a Gilead refugee. Neil and Melanie's death and this revealed information sweeps Nicole into the Mayday resistance's operation, particularly because their contact in Gilead wants Nicole to infiltrate her way into the country, receive information that could bring Gilead's downfall, and escape again. Although Nicole is overwhelmed and hesitant to get involved, the other operatives assume that she consents, and so she becomes a semi-willing participant in their plan. With a minimal amount of training, Nicole assumes the name Jade and enters Gilead by posing as a homeless teenager who converts to Gilead's faith. There she meets Agnes and Becka, who attempt to teach her to be modest and submissive, with limited success. After several weeks, Lydia reveals herself to Nicole as Mayday's mysterious contact and also reveals that Agnes is Nicole's half-sister. After having Lydia's cache of damning information implanted into her arm, Nicole escapes from Gilead with Agnes, and the two pretend to be missionaries in order to deliver the documents and data to Canadian media outlets. Agnes and Nicole then finally meet their biological mother, the former Handmaid Offred.

Becka / Aunt Immortelle – Becka is Agnes's friend and Dr. Grove's daughter. Becka grows up with Agnes, attending the same elite schools. However, the two do not grow close until they are entering puberty, bonding over their shared horror at the idea of being forced to marry an older man. Becka is so stricken by this thought—in part because Dr. Grove sexually abuses her throughout her childhood—and her lack of choice in the matter that she slashes her wrist, choosing to die by her own decision than be passively forced into a marriage. When she survives, Aunt Lydia offers her a place in Ardua Hall as an Aunt instead of being forced into a marriage. Once Agnes arrives in Ardua Hall as well, she and Becka form an intimate, sisterly relationship, especially as they both learn to read and realize that Gilead is built on fraud and rife with corruption. When Lydia explains her plan to send Nicole with her damning information out of Gilead, which will require Becka to effectively sacrifice herself, Becka agrees for the sake of her friends. Although Lydia expects that Becka will survive as long as she can, Becka again decides to proactively take her own life, this time by drowning herself in a water cistern rather than letting herself be arrested and tortured. Although tragic, Becka's decision to die by suicide rather than be imprisoned in either a cell or an unwanted marriage prioritizes her ability to choose and have agency over her life—and even her death.

Commander Judd – Commander Judd is the leader of the Eyes and one of the Sons of Jacob, the original men who initiated the coup that gave rise to Gilead. As one of the most powerful men in Gilead, Judd both cooperates with and stands in opposition to Aunt Lydia, and the two share a very close—though tense and complex—relationship as they maintain their balance of power. It is Judd who orders Lydia's initial arrest and torture and coerces her into helping him establish the social structures and rules that govern women in Gilead. However, Lydia's power and influence gradually grow to the point that she represents a legitimate threat to him, and the two take up an uneasy truce as a result. As Lydia is well aware, Judd is also a pedophile and murderer who marries "child brides" and then surreptitiously kills them when they grow too old for his tastes. Although Judd technically outranks Lydia because he is a man, he is reliant on both her intel and her manipulative powers to achieve many of his aims, which increases their interdependence on each other even though they ultimately oppose each other's aims. When Agnes is of marriageable age—around 12—Judd becomes engaged to her until Lydia rescues her by making her an Aunt. Although Judd works to uncover the plot against Gilead, he does not realize that Lydia is its orchestrator until is too late, and he presumably dies during Gilead's fall from power.

Aunt Vidala – Aunt Vidala is the second most powerful Aunt in Gilead, one of the Founders, and Lydia's chief rival among them. Unlike Judd, who has a complex relationship with Lydia, Vidala is purely antagonistic towards her. Although the other Founding Aunts were arrested and tortured into cooperating with the Sons of Jacob to build Gilead, Vidala was an early and voluntary convert. She is militaristic, violent, and enjoys instilling fear into even very young girls (such as Agnes and Becka) about the evils of sexuality and the wicked potential of their female bodies. Vidala is also a noted sadist, and she takes disturbing pleasure in torturing interrogation subjects. Throughout the story, Vidala plots to discredit Lydia and reveal whatever she is hiding, hoping to take more power for herself. However, Lydia uses this plot to turn Aunt Elizabeth against Vidala by painting her as a mutual threat to both Lydia and Elizabeth. When Vidala tries to stop Agnes and Nicole's escape, Nicole punches her in the chest hard enough to stop her heart and put her into a brief coma. When Vidala begins to awake, Lydia knows that she has discovered Lydia's plot, so Lydia convinces Aunt Elizabeth to murder Vidala, smothering her

with a pillow while she rests.

Aunt Helena – Aunt Helena is one of the Founders, and she was arrested and coerced into developing Gilead at the same time as Aunt Lydia. Although Aunt Helena holds power as a Founder and appears often in the narrative, she is weak-willed and exists entirely in the shadow of the other leading Aunts. Even when she does not agree with Lydia or Vidala's machinations, she follows along with them, feeling as if she has no choice but to bend to their power. Because of this, Helena has very little character of her own, but mainly echoes the opinions of others.

Aunt Elizabeth – Aunt Elizabeth is one of the Founders, and she was arrested and coerced into developing Gilead at the same time as Aunt Lydia. Aunt Elizabeth is not as powerful or assertive as either Aunt Vidala or Lydia, but she demonstrates more agency than Aunt Helena does. Although Elizabeth often supports Vidala, when Lydia fraudulently convinces Elizabeth that Vidala is scheming to have Elizabeth publicly denounced and removed from power, Elizabeth allies herself with Lydia for her own protection. As a result, Lydia convinces Aunt Elizabeth to falsely accuse Dr. Grove of raping her, so that he will be shamed, executed, and brought to justice for his sexual abuse of numerous young girls. Although doing this earns Elizabeth Aunt Lydia's favor, it also binds Elizabeth to her entirely, since Lydia now has knowledge and evidence of Elizabeth making a false accusation that she could leverage if she so chose. When Vidala is comatose and Lydia knows that Vidala has uncovered Lydia's plot against Gilead, Lydia coerces Elizabeth into murdering Vidala in her sleep, smothering her with a pillow.

Paula – Paula is Agnes's stepmother, whom Commander Kyle marries after Tabitha dies. Paula and Agnes immediately despise each other, and Paula takes this hatred out on Agnes in insidious ways, such as sending her alone to Dr. Grove's office as a pubescent child, knowing that he will sexually abuse her. Paula arranges for Agnes to be married off as young as possible purely as a way to get rid of her in a "socially acceptable manner." However, when Agnes avoids the arranged marriage by claiming she's called to become an Aunt, Paula tries to block her escape and force her to go through with the marriage. Her attempt fails when Lydia threatens Paula with her knowledge that Paula murdered her first husband and framed their Handmaid for the crime.

Commander Kyle – Commander Kyle is Agnes's legal father, though they are of no biological relation. Commander Kyle is an important political figure in Gilead who is often busy and has no relationship with Agnes whatsoever—as she grows up, she rarely sees him. After his wife Tabitha dies of an apparent illness, Commander Kyle marries Paula. However, when Agnes is an adult living in Ardua Hall, Lydia reveals evidence of Paula's affair with Kyle before they were married. Lydia also reveals that Paula murdered her first husband, which implies to Agnes that Tabitha was also murdered by Commander Kyle so that he could marry Paula.

Handmaid Ofkyle / Crystal – Ofkyle is Commander Kyle's Handmaid, whom he procures after marrying Paula, who is infertile. Ofkyle is the only Handmaid actually depicted in the story. Everyone in Commander Kyle's household ignores Ofkyle until she becomes pregnant, at which point they dote upon her. However, Agnes notices that Paula and Kyle and their friends only express admiration for Ofkyle's pregnant belly but not for Ofkyle herself, thus dehumanizing her and treating her not as a person, but only as a womb. When Ofkyle gives birth, there are complications and the doctor cuts Ofkyle open to save the baby, killing her in the process. The family regards Ofkyle as a sacrificial hero, but Agnes recognizes that she was never given the choice of whether or not to sacrifice herself for the child, and thinks it unjust that that decision was made for her. Many years after her death, Agnes looks Ofkyle up in the genealogical records and discovers that her real name was Crystal, which is how Agnes chooses to remember her.

Ada – Ada is a friend of Melanie's who becomes Nicole's guardian after Gilead operatives murder Neil and Melanie. Throughout her childhood, Nicole sees Ada but does not know her, and finds her strange and intimidating. However, after Neil and Melanie die, Ada takes Nicole into hiding with her. There, Nicole learns that not only is Ada a Mayday operative who helped smuggle her out of Gilead when she was a baby, carrying her through the Vermont woods in a backpack, but she has also been watching over Nicole for her entire life. In the short time they spend together, Ada becomes nearly a substitute mother figure, watching over Nicole and protecting her while they are on the run from Gilead's agents. When Nicole and Agnes finally make it out of Gilead and into Canada, Ada is there to meet them on the shore.

Shunammite – Shunammite is one of Agnes's classmates in primary school. Shunammite claims to be Agnes's friend, but appears to only cozy up to her because of the ways in which it benefits her. Shunammite is rude and domineering and reveals that Agnes's biological mother was a Handmaid, because she enjoys the attention and power that the revelation give her. Unlike Agnes and Becka, Shunammite parrots every belief that Gilead teaches her and looks forward to marriage. After Agnes escapes the prospect of marrying Commander Judd, Shunammite happily marries him instead. However, Judd begins to slowly murder her with rat poison so he can marry a new, younger girl instead, until Aunt Lydia intervenes and hides Shunammite in Ardua Hall.

Tabitha – Tabitha is Agnes's legal mother who dies when Agnes is young, apparently due to illness, though it's later implied that her husband Commander Kyle murdered her. Although Agnes initially believes that Tabitha is her biological mother, she learns shortly after Tabitha's death that Tabitha adopted Agnes after Agnes was retrieved from her true mother, an escaped Handmaid, and brought back to Gilead as a toddler. This is

difficult news for Agnes to cope with, but even so, Agnes and Tabitha truly loved each other while Tabitha was alive.

Dr. Grove – Dr. Grove is Becka's father and a highly regarded dentist who serves various commanders. Dr. Grove is a pedophile who sexually abuses Becka from the age of four and also abuses Agnes when she is just entering puberty. However, in spite of these crimes, Dr. Grove is not held accountable, since both girls know that if they report his abuse, they will be punished for presumably attempting to smear a professional man's good name. However, when Lydia discovers Dr. Grove's sexual abuse of young girls, she resolves to bring him to justice herself, inciting Elizabeth to make a false rape charge against him. In his public execution, Dr. Grove is literally torn to pieces by 70 enraged Handmaids.

Aunt Estée – Aunt Estée is one of the main teachers at Agnes's school in Gilead, often teaching alongside Aunt Vidala. Where Aunt Vidala is strict, fierce, and seems to enjoy scaring Agnes and her classmates about the evils of sexuality and punishments for sinners, Aunt Estée is gentler and kinder. Even so, Aunt Estée teaches the same repressive principles as Vidala does, reinforcing women's repression and the idea of their natural inferiority to men.

George – George is a street person whom Nicole often sees hanging around her parents' store, The Clothes Hound. Nicole thinks he is creepy and suspects him of being some kind of pervert, but after she goes into hiding with Ada, Nicole learns that George is a actually a Mayday operative who helps gather intelligence.

Elijah – Elijah is a friend of Ada's and a Mayday operative who helps Ada and Nicole hide while they are on the run from Gilead agents. Elijah reveals to Nicole that she is not Neil and Melanie's daughter Daisy, as she'd always believed, but rather the grown version of Baby Nicole. Elijah helps plan and coordinate Nicole's infiltration into Gilead.

Garth – Garth is a man in his mid-20s, a Mayday operative who helps shelter Ada and Nicole while they are hiding from Gilead's operatives. While Garth is teaching Nicole how to keep fit and to fight in preparation for her mission into Gilead, Nicole develops a substantial crush on him. This only increases while Garth and Nicole are posing as a boyfriend and girlfriend living together on the street, with the goal of getting the Pearl Girls to pick Nicole up and bring her back to Gilead with them as a convert. When Agnes and Nicole land on the beach upon returning to Canada, Garth is there to meet them on the shore.

Neil – Neil is Nicole's supposed father when she still believes her name is Daisy, though he is truly a Mayday operative tasked with raising Nicole alongside Melanie. Neil co-owns the second-hand clothing store, The Clothes Hound, from which he exchanges information with Aunt Lydia in Gilead via smuggled microfilm, until Gilead agents discover him and murder him.

Melanie – Melanie is Nicole's supposed mother when she still believes her name is Daisy, though she is truly a Mayday operative tasked with raising Nicole alongside Neil. Melanie co-owns the second-hand clothing store The Clothes Hound, from which she supports Mayday's resistance efforts, until she is discovered by Gilead agents and murdered.

Anita – Anita is one of Lydia's former colleagues from the days before Gilead was established, when they were both judges. When the Sons of Jacob overthrow the United States Congress, Lydia and Anita are taken together to the stadium. While Lydia decides to cooperate with the Sons of Jacob, Anita holds to her principles and is executed by firing squad.

James Darcy Pieixoto – James Pieixoto is a historian and professor who speaks at a symposium on Gilead history in 2197. The transcript of Pieixoto's speech confirms that Gilead did fall in the years after Aunt Lydia's document cache was released, and it also reveals that Agnes and Nicole are the escaped Handmaid Offred's daughters.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Aunt Lise – Aunt Lise is a teacher at the premarital preparatory school that Agnes, Shunammite, and Becka attend. Aunt Lise is supervising the girls' flower-cutting when Becka slashes her wrist with the scissors.

Captain Mishimengo – Captain Mishimengo is the captain of the smuggling vessel *The Nellie J. Banks*, which ferries Agnes and Nicole downriver and out to sea, sending them towards freedom in Canada.

Aunt Gabbana – Aunt Gabbana is a wedding planner and arranger of marriages who organizes Agnes's engagement to Commander Judd.

Martha Rosa – Martha Rosa is one of the three Marthas assigned to Commander Kyle's house.

Martha Vera – Martha Vera is one of the three Marthas assigned to Commander Kyle's house.

Martha Zilla – Martha Zilla is one of the three Marthas assigned to Commander Kyle's house. Zilla is the kindest of the Marthas, and Agnes likes her the best as a young girl.

Aunt Beatrice – Aunt Beatrice is one of the Pearl Girls who picks up Nicole and escorts her into Gilead as a convert.

Aunt Dove – Aunt Dove is one of the Pearl Girls who picks up Nicole. While Aunt Beatrice takes Nicole back to Gilead, Aunt Dove remains in Canada so that Nicole can pose as her to get through customs, and thus they can avoid any Canadian charges of human trafficking.

Aunt Adrianna – Aunt Adrianna is a Pearl Girl working for Aunt Lydia and Mayday. Aunt Adrianna tries to kill Aunt Sally to prevent her from reporting to the Gilead Embassy in Toronto that they've located Nicole, but Aunt Sally kills her instead.

Aunt Sally – Aunt Sally is a Pearl Girl who spots Nicole in

Toronto. However, when she tries to report this to the Gilead Embassy, Aunt Adrianna tries to kill her. Sally overpowers Adrianna and kills her instead, to her own horror.

TERMS

Aunts – Aunts are an elite class of women who work primarily in administrative roles in Gilead. The Aunts are unique among Gilead in that they are the only women allowed to read and be educated and they are forbidden from marrying. They operate entirely behind the scenes, using information that they gather to control and manipulate events in society. The Aunts are responsible for presiding over all other women and their concerns in Gilead. They reside exclusively in Ardua Hall and are led by **Aunt Lydia**.

Commanders – Commanders are an elite class of men in Gilead who occupy national leadership roles or political positions.

Handmaids – Handmaids are a special cast of fertile women whom Gilead has deemed too immoral to be married—usually because they were not virgins when they came to Gilead. Handmaids are assigned to powerful men, usually Commanders, to have sex with them and bear the men's children when their legal wives are found to be infertile. Because of their position, Handmaids are reviled by Gilead's society, seen as immoral and shameful women. Contact between Handmaids and any other class is expected to be as minimal as possible.

Marthas – Marthas are a class of female house-servants in Gilead who serve powerful families but are not allowed to marry or have their own children.

Pearl Girls – Pearl Girls are Aunts who serve as Gilead's missionaries, traveling to Canada and other nations to find young women to convert to Gilead's faith and transport back to Gilead. However, because they move openly in other societies, Pearl Girls often act in espionage roles as well, gathering intelligence in other countries and relaying information for the Aunts. When a Pearl Girl returns to Gilead with a new convert, called a Pearl, she graduates from being a Supplicant to a full-fledged Aunt.

Angels – Angels are Gilead's militaristic security force. They wear black uniforms and carry rifles at all times.

Eyes – The Eyes are Gilead's main intelligence force, a mysterious and feared presence throughout the nation. The Eyes are known for being ruthless and carrying out assassinations, kidnappings, and torture both in Gilead and other countries. The Eyes are also the single group in Gilead that does not fear the Aunts' influence and power. **Commander Judd** leads the Eyes.

Supplicants – Supplicants are Aunts in training, usually teenagers, who have not yet completed their Pearl Girl mission.

Pearls – Pearls are new converts to Gilead's faith, transported from the outside world into Gilead by an accompanying Pearl Girl.

Founders – The Founders refer to **Aunt Lydia**, **Aunt Vidala**, **Aunt Helena**, and **Aunt Elizabeth**, the four women who developed not only the Aunts but all of Gilead's social structures and rules as pertaining to women. The Founders are legendary figures across Gilead.

Mayday – Mayday is an anti-Gilead resistance movement that operates in Canada. For decades, Mayday has collaborated with people in and outside of Gilead to smuggle oppressed women out of Gilead and harbor them as refugees. Mayday is hated by Gilead and recognized as a terrorist organization by Canada due to the power and influence that Gilead exerts on the Canadian government, though civilians in Canada seem to support its work.

Sons of Jacob – The Sons of Jacob refer to the original men who destroyed the United States Congress and overthrew the country, erecting Gilead in its place. **Commander Judd** is the only Son of Jacob explicitly named in the story.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RELIGIOUS TOTALITARIANISM AND HYPOCRISY

Following up 1985's *A Handmaid's Tale*, *The Testaments* depicts the last days of Gilead, a dystopian society that has replaced the United States in the near future. Gilead is a theocratic regime, meaning that its government and its religion are intertwined at every level, and the rulers believe that their authority comes from God himself. Thus, the ruthless oppression and terrible violence it inflicts are all done in the name of God, using pieces of the Bible or other religious teachings as its justification. While the totalitarian government's actions may seem extreme, Atwood draws each brutality from actual historical events, crafting Gilead into a disturbing warning of the possibilities of theocratic governments and the abuse of religious power. While the novel does not argue that all religion is inherently bad, it demonstrates the power and potential of religious abuse already realized throughout history.

Originally established as a "Puritan theocracy," Gilead's power structures are justified through particular passages from the Bible, demonstrating how religion can be employed to establish

and uphold totalitarian systems. Although very few individuals are allowed to read it, Gilead's leaders hold the Bible as their source of authority and power—the only Bibles are kept "in the darkness of their locked boxes, glowing with arcane energy," suggesting that Gilead's general citizenry ascribe a mythical sense of power to them in their minds. This increases the power of Gilead's leadership, since they can argue that any dissension is a betrayal of not just Gilead, but God, and thus a threat to the dissenter's mortal soul. As they preach it, obedience to God is the same as obedience to the government. Aiming to subjugate women, the men of Gilead base their marital systems almost entirely on a brief description of Abraham's life in the Old Testament, where he he has complete power over his wife, and when she could not bear him a child, has sex with her handmaid as well to produce an offspring. By codifying this one instance into law and creating a class of Handmaids who are forced to bear men's children, Gilead's male leaders are able to enforce and justify a regressive view of marriage and gender that benefits themselves at the expense of women. Although Canada exists as a democratic state and opposes all of Gilead's ideals, Gilead's leadership indoctrinates its citizens to believe that Canada is morally bankrupt, equating them with Sodom, a city that God smites in the Old Testament as punishment for their wickedness. By teaching and reinforcing the belief that the outside world is sinful and the object of God's wrath, Gilead's leadership strengthen their grip over their own citizens, who want to live virtuous lives and thus fear the corruption of the outside world.

However, the novel clearly argues that Gilead's understanding of the biblical God is misconstrued and that religious hypocrisy is rampant within Gilead's leadership, suggesting that such a totalitarian regime built on religion is abusing that religion and bastardizing it, rather than embodying it as it was meant to be practiced. The narrative argues that Gilead's leadership only utilizes some of the Bible and ignores much of it. When Becka, a young woman who is training for a celibate, administrative role called an Aunt, is finally allowed to read the Bible for herself, she discovers that the "Gilead kind of God"—an overwhelming masculine and powerful God—does not fit with the idea of God written about in much of the Bible. Although she cannot admit this publicly, Becka warns her friend Agnes that the Bible "does not say what they say it says" and that after reading the Bible oneself, one can either "believe in Gilead or [...] believe in God, but not both," arguing that Gilead's oppressive vision of God and the Bible's description of God are mutually exclusive. Despite the fact that Gilead claims to be a bastion of moral purity, the majority of its leadership are disturbingly criminal and predatory. Many of them murder and bribe others to increase their power, and prominent figures use their power to sexually abuse and even murder children and teenage girls. Although Agnes once believed in Gilead's righteous cause, as she learns about the widespread and grotesque crimes at the highest levels of government, she realizes that "Gilead is rotten," suggesting that it is not the bastion of biblical or moral principle that it claims to be.

Although Gilead employs bits of the Bible, Atwood goes out of her way to avoid making Christianity the prime target of the novel's social commentary, suggesting that though organized religion can be abused and made a vessel of totalitarianism, it is not in itself the root cause of such corruption, but merely a potentially dangerous tool. Along with never explicitly mentioning Christianity itself—rather, Gilead is recognized as a country of "religious fanatics" and its religion is referred to as "the faith of Gilead"—Gilead is violently opposed to other Christian groups such as Catholics, Quakers, and Mormons, placing them in the same camp as secular Canada. This suggests that Atwood is not trying to warn of the evils of Christianity as a whole, but the extremists and abusers of it. This is reinforced by the fact that Becka and Agnes see the evil of Gilead but maintain their faith in the biblical God. Although realizing how corrupt and wretched Gilead is challenges their belief, they both ultimately choose to maintain their religious faith, even after Agnes escapes from Gilead. Although Gilead uses the Bible and certainly parallels aspects of Christian fundamentalism, the narrative's cautious and nuanced handling of religion suggests that the novel is not condemning religion or even Christianity at large, but warning against its integration into government to justify totalitarian rule, as has been seen numerous times throughout history such as the New England Puritans (enactors of the Salem Witch Trials) in the late 1600s or the Caliphate that ruled the Middle East and territory in Europe, Africa, and Asia for 600 years following the Prophet Muhammad's death.

GENDER ROLES

Gilead's social structure is premised on its belief that men and women are unequal, which the leadership argues is biologically evident. Men, Gilead believes, are intelligent, sophisticated, and natural leaders, while women are presumed to be stupid, infantile, and weak, only fit for giving birth or doing chores in the home. Because of this belief, Gilead's laws strictly enforce gender roles and contradicting them is punishable by public execution. Even so, the female characters are more than capable of doing "men's work," and are completely unhindered by their gender, in spite of Gilead's beliefs. Although Gilead enforces strict gender roles that it argues are biologically determined, the novel's female characters demonstrate that women can do any task just as well as men, which suggests that narrowly defined gender roles are ultimately baseless, instilled only by society.

Gilead enforces strict gender roles by arguing that they are based in biology, which in turn affects how its women see themselves, suggesting that strict enforcement of gender roles and norms can lead women to have a lower view of their own capacities. Gilead relegates women to minor reductive roles in

society, allowing them only to be Marthas (house servants), Handmaids (fertile women forced to bear children for powerful, married men—the lowest position in society), or wives. Additionally, a very small number are able to become Aunts, working as female administrators over other women. Men, however, are allowed to be leaders, doctors, scientists, or to hold any other professional capacity. These gender roles are taught to young girls at an early age to indoctrinate them into accepting their very limited position in life. In their early education, Agnes and Becka are taught that, biologically, men's brains are "hard" and "focused" while theirs are "soft" and ill-suited to any complicated task, fundamentally less capable than any man's brain. This justification, though obviously false, leads Agnes to have a disparaging view of her own intelligence. After being taught that she has a naturally weaker brain, she sadly envisions that it is nothing more than a pile of "warmed-up mud," demonstrating that such strict and narrow gender roles can lead women to have a low view of their own capabilities. A disturbing aspect of women's resultant sense of inferiority is that it leads them to defer to men, their supposed superiors, even when doing so puts them in danger. When Agnes is just beginning to enter puberty, Becka's father, Dr. Grove, sexually assaults her, but Agnes knows that she cannot resist or tell anyone about it since her abuser is a man, and thus more important and intelligent than herself. Agnes's pained silence emphasizes that such gender roles not only can create an under-developed sense of self for women, but also put them in danger and inhibit their ability to stand up for themselves.

Despite these narrow gender roles and low view of women's capabilities, several female characters prove that they are more than capable of performing "male" roles, arguing thus that Gilead's strict gender roles have no biological basis. Agnes's secret younger sister, Nicole, grows up in Canada, outside of the gender bias of Gilead, and thus shows far more confidence in her own capacities. As an operative for a resistance movement trying to penetrate Gilead, Nicole learns several "male" skills, such as how to handle a boat and how to fight in hand-to-hand combat, which she does successfully to protect herself. Nicole's ability to operate and defend herself just as well as any man, despite being a young woman, suggests that Gilead's rigid gender roles have no basis in biological or practical reality. Even within Gilead, the Aunts' very existence defies any real distinction between men and women's capabilities, pointing out that such narrow gender roles are baseless. Although women are taught that they are incapable of leadership or advanced thought, the Aunts are literate, capable, cunning, and often use their knowledge to manipulate events and subtly advance their own power in society. Although Gilead's leadership classifies leadership and administration as men's roles, their society is dependent on the Aunts carrying out their duties as administrators. Gilead's best attempt at explaining the Aunts' obvious capability is that their brains are somehow "different" than normal women's brains—Agnes wonders as a child if Aunts' brains are "neither male nor female"—which makes them useful as public servants but unfit for marriage or family. When Becka and Agnes both become Aunts, they overcome their "mud brains" and learn how to read and how to reason, They discover that in spite of the low view of their own intelligence they were raised to have, they are every bit as intelligent as any men, and that Gilead's rigid gender roles were merely designed to keep them down.

When the lead female characters step out from under Gilead's expectations of how women will behave and view themselves, Gilead ultimately falls. The symbolic victory of women over an oppressive men's regime suggests that not only are such gender roles only socially constructed, but that women can be a powerful force when unhindered by societal expectations. This liberation is briefly symbolized when Agnes wears pants for the first time during her escape from Gilead. Having spent her entire life in long skirts as Gilead's laws demand of women, Agnes is at first disturbed by the thought of wearing what she perceives to be men's clothes. However, the first time she climbs a ladder, she realizes how much freer her legs are to move without the confines of a long skirt, suggesting that without the confines of her gendered role in society, she is far more capable. Atwood's message extends beyond Gilead, too. Through *The Testaments*, Atwood leads readers to consider how such strict gender roles persist in modern society, ultimately arguing that they are unnecessary and inhibit women's full potential.

TRUTH, KNOWLEDGE, AND POWER

Gilead, in all its repression, corruption, and brutality, is awash with secrets: who murdered whom, which biblical teachings are outright fraudulent, what really goes on in the highest levels of government. Gilead's government goes to great lengths to keep those secrets. As a result, general citizens (and especially women) are kept as ignorant as possible, since Gilead's leadership understands that the truth is a danger to them and the right knowledge in the right hands could spell their own doom. This turns out to be a well-founded fear since Aunt Lydia, though a woman, uses her knowledge to become one of the most powerful figures in Gilead and ultimately bring its injustice to an end. Through Gilead's enforced ignorance and Lydia's leverage of knowledge to assert power and destroy the unjust regime, the narrative argues that knowledge is power and truth is the greatest weapon for fighting injustice.

Gilead goes to great lengths to keep women ignorant, suggesting that enforced ignorance is a means of control, and knowledgeable women would thus threaten that control. Except for the Aunts, who are kept apart from the rest of society, women are strictly forbidden from learning how to read. From a young age, girls are taught that books are "evil" and full of "forbidden things," so that they will not read about

other, freer women and begin to question the way that they live within Gilead. Even for those women who become Aunts, they are not allowed to access any books or new ideas until their minds are "strengthened enough to reject them," suggesting that Gilead's leadership fears even the Aunts being exposed to new ideas until they are sufficiently indoctrinated. Gilead's fear of women reading and learning suggests that they know that their own control is built on flimsy premises. This is particularly evident in their treatment of the Bible, on which they claim to base their society. Even when Becka or other high-ranking Aunts are allowed to read the Bible, they are forbidden from discussing it with anyone else at all, since its actual support for Gilead's structure and control is incredibly weak. This again suggests that such knowledge in the right hands would thus be a threat to Gilead or any such oppressive regime.

Aunt Lydia is the most powerful character in the story, despite being a woman, because she knows how to gather and utilize knowledge, demonstrating that knowledge is power even within a repressive environment. As the leading Aunt in Gilead since its inception and a master of clandestine surveillance, Lydia amasses decade's worth of criminal evidence against individuals at every level of power in Gilead, such as recordings of sexual assault, evidence of bribery, and photos and videos of various murders committed by heads of state. This accumulated knowledge gives Lydia the power to preserve herself even when other powerful figures, such as her rival Aunt Vidala, want to destroy her, since Lydia has set up several mechanisms to release all of that information if her life is ended. Lydia's knowledge of Gilead's inner workings and misdealing allows her to manipulate events and rescue other women as she can. When Agnes is about to be forced to marry the powerful Commander Judd, who has a history of murdering his wives, Lydia leverages her knowledge against both Judd and Agnes's stepmother. She forces them to let Agnes be made an Aunt instead, thus saving Agnes from marriage. Lydia does the same for Becka and several other unnamed women, thus demonstrating that knowledge can grant not only the power to save oneself, but also to save others as well. Although she is constantly under threat as a woman in a strictly patriarchal regime, Lydia even exerts power over Commander Judd, one of the most powerful men in the country, by leveraging her knowledge of his pedophilia and murders of multiple young wives so that he could have a new, younger one in their place. Lydia's ability to even overpower the story's most powerful man suggests that the power knowledge grants can even supersede strict gender roles and oppressive power structures.

When Lydia finally releases her decades' worth of evidence of the grotesque crimes of Gilead's leadership, the world is so outraged at the gross injustice that the theocratic regime swiftly falls to international pressure and local rebellions, demonstrating that knowledge—and ultimately truth—is a powerful weapon to fight injustice. After Nicole successfully infiltrates Gilead on behalf of a resistance movement, posing as new covert to Gilead's religion, Lydia implants all of the evidence and knowledge she has carefully gathered in a microfilm into Nicole's arm, before orchestrating her and Agnes's escape back to Canada. The Canadian government swiftly disseminates the information across the whole world, and overnight Gilead's leaders and power figures are entirely discredited and made the most hated people on earth, which builds enough pressure to topple the regime and restore it as the United States of America between the novel's ending and the epilogue. In spite of Gilead's strength and military power, all that it took to end its injustice was the truth of what truly goes on beneath its secretive veneer. This ending strongly argues that knowledge is power, and truth is thus ultimately the most powerful tool for fighting injustice across the world.

SHAME, FEAR, AND REPRESSION

Gilead's male leadership is obsessed with repressing women's sexuality and keeping them "pure," loyal, and subdued, even while the men in power abuse their authority to fulfill their own violently lecherous and often pedophilic whims. Agnes's narrative, spanning her years in primary school through her young adulthood, models the mix of indoctrination, brutal punishment, and fear that Gilead uses to make women terrified of recognizing or exploring their own sexuality, and thus keeps them subdued and controlled. Through Agnes's experience, the novel makes a broader narrative comment about how repressive regimes or societies use shame and fear to repress woman's sexuality and make them submissive.

From a young age, Agnes and her fellow student are taught to fear their sexuality and the potential allure of their bodies. When Agnes is only six or seven, she and her female peers are taught in school that they are like valuable little flowers, and their purity and beauty is their "treasure," suggesting that, in Gilead's view, their principal value is in their pure, untarnished sexual potential. However, they are simultaneously taught that "the urges of men are terrible things and those urges need to be curbed" and that even as young girls their bodies are "snares and enticements [...] the innocent and blameless causes that through our very nature could make men drunk with lust." Thus, if they are not careful to never show any indecency, their "petals would be torn off and [their] treasure would be stolen"—in other words, they will be forcibly violated by men, which Agnes has nightmares about throughout her childhood. Gilead claims that even a young girl's body is a dangerous thing which needs to be hidden, and implies that if one of them should be attacked or raped, it is their own fault for not being prudent enough. Agnes's nightmares suggest that such teaching is so frightening and psychologically damaging that it traumatizes her. As Agnes grows older and enters puberty, noticing that her body is beginning to change and develop

curves, she feels that she is "no longer a precious flower but a much more dangerous creature." This does not create a sense of power but only additional fear, as she reflects: "The adult female body was one big booby trap as far as I could tell. If there was a hole, something was bound to be shoved into it [...] I was left feeling I would be better off without it." Agnes's pervasive fear of her own womanly body and wish that she did not have it at all again demonstrates the manner in which fear can be used to repress sexuality, as well as the trauma and self-contempt that results from such repression.

Although women in Gilead are valued primarily as sexual objects in their roles as wives or Handmaids, they are never taught that sex could possibly be enjoyable, since this could entice them to explore their desires on their own, demonstrating the manner in which a regime or system may repress women's sexuality through denying any sense of pleasure. Gilead's education system for women is vary wary of putting "too much emphasis on the theoretical delights of sex, [since] the result would almost certainly be curiosity and experimentation, followed by moral degeneracy," suggesting that although the men of Gilead surreptitiously seek out sexual pleasure for themselves, women are forbidden from experiencing or even being aware of such pleasure, so as to further repress and control their sexuality. Young women like Agnes are forced into arranged marriages as soon as they have their first period, "before any chance encounter with an unsuitable man might occur that would lead to what used to be called falling in love or, worse, to loss of virginity." Gilead's treatment of women is engineered to remove any connection between pleasure and sexuality, especially through youthful experimentation or romance, so that they can exert more control and keep women more easily subdued.

When fear and denial of pleasure don't work to keep women hemmed in and subdued, Gilead's society casts tremendous public shame on any woman perceived to be unduly embracing her sexuality. Adultery is treated as the ultimate crime in Gilead, worse than murder, and is a capital offense. Agnes reflects, "death by stoning was not a fate anyone wanted for their children, and the stain of it on a family could be indelible." The shame Gilead ascribes to women who have sex outside their legal bounds of marriage not only affects them, but also mars their family even after their death. Handmaids are the only women in Gilead permitted to have any sort of sexual contact outside of marriage, since they are temporarily assigned to wealthy men to have sex with them and bear children on behalf of their wives. Although infertility is at epidemic levels and many families rely on fertile Handmaids to produce offspring for them, Handmaids are treated as social pariahs and regarded as "sluts" and "untouchables." Even though Gilead's government legislates the use of Handmaids and needs them to sustain the population, society reviles these women. This not only demonstrates the shame attached to women's sexuality, but adds to the fear and stigma that ensures wives will only ever express their sexuality in the privacy and strict confines of their relationships with their husbands. The deep societal stigma and shame Gilead attaches to women's sexuality models the manner in which a system, institution, or regime may seek to keep women repressed and subdued.

CHOICE

Women in Gilead are given little to no choice in nearly every aspect of their lives, and this lack of personal agency or autonomy becomes a source of anger, frustration, and fear for Agnes and Becka. However, even Nicole, who grows up in an open, democratic society in Canada and has considerably more power to make her own decisions, finds that sometimes she, too, is given little choice in major decisions in her life—especially when she is swept up in external events and circumstances beyond her control. Through Agnes, Becka, and Nicole's consideration of choice and agency, the narrative suggests that the power to exercise one's personal agency and choose what happens to their body and their life is an important human right, though sometimes circumstance and fate may press one to nobly sacrifice that agency for the sake of offering agency to others.

The frustration and fear that Agnes and Becka experience over not being given choices in their life suggests that a woman's ability to choose is a fundamental right and necessary for their health and wellbeing. As a girl, Agnes witnesses her adoptive father's Handmaid, Ofkyle, die in childbirth. The doctor realizes that only the mother or the child will live, and so without consulting Ofkyle, cuts her open to save the baby. While Agnes's family and the doctors and nurses praise Ofkyle for making the "ultimate sacrifice" and dying with "noble womanly honor," Agnes is deeply disturbed, since Ofkyle's sacrificial death "wasn't something she chose." The doctor forced it on her without asking permission, without giving her the choice. Agnes's revulsion and sadness suggests that it is not even Ofkyle's death, but her total inability to choose to live or sacrifice herself, that seems the greatest injustice thrust upon her as a woman. When they are just entering puberty, both Becka and Agnes fear their forthcoming forced marriages. Although they each get three possible husbands to "choose" from—which is only the illusion of choice, since their parents will be the ones to actually choose—they are both horrified at the prospect of being forced to marry an older man, being forced to have sex with him. However, neither Agnes or Becka are against having families someday, it is just this forced method of it and their utter lack of choice that they find so fearful. In the weeks before her wedding, Becka attempts to commit suicide. Becka's attempted suicide represents what she believes will be her last choice in the face of a choiceless life, a married life without agency. Her resolve to die rather than be forced into a dismal marriage she did not want suggests that

her agency and power to choose is more important to her than life itself—to her, life without any agency would not be worth living.

However, even in comparatively free societies such as Canada, where women like Nicole are given far more choice, circumstances and the greater flow of history may limit one's actual choices or press them to sacrifice their own agency. Contrasting with Becka and Agnes's utter lack of choice and freedom to determine their own lives, Nicole is given a comparatively large amount of choice and agency in her life, even in desperate circumstances. After Nicole's adoptive parents are murdered by Gilead operatives who are after Nicole, her new guardian, Ada, takes her on the run but is careful to allow Nicole the opportunity to walk away or go to the police—even though doing so would most likely mean Nicole's capture or death. Ada's willingness to let Nicole make her own choices as an individual, even if there should be deadly consequences, suggests that she understands how important a woman's sense of choice is and respects Nicole's personal agency. Even so, when it becomes clear that Nicole is the only person who could infiltrate Gilead and retrieve Lydia's cache of information, the other resistance operatives sweep Nicole into their plans without her ever truly choosing to be involved: "I somehow agreed to go to Gilead without ever definitely agreeing. I said I'd think about it, and then the next morning everyone acted as if I'd said yes," leading Nicole to see the mission as a necessity, though not a choice. Nicole's lack of choice in a decision that could cost her her life chillingly resembles Handmaid Ofkyle's lack of choice in whether or not to die to save her baby. This complicates the concept of choice, since Nicole's unchosen mission is the best hope of toppling Gilead, suggesting that an individual may sometimes need to set aside their own personal agency for the sake of the greater good, which in Nicole's case will free the women in Gilead and allow them all to have the ability to choose and exert their own personal agency.

Becka faces a similar lack of choice when she and Agnes are swept into Lydia's plan to smuggle information to Canada via Nicole. Although Agnes and Nicole will travel to Canada, Becka must stay behind to act as a diversion, which means she will certainly be captured, tortured, and killed. By the time Becka learns of her role, the plan is already in motion and she must accept her self-sacrifice or risk the lives of everyone else involved. Becka willingly accepts this non-choice to help her friends and ultimately all the women in Gilead, which again suggests that although having choice and personal agency is critically important, in the sweep of events greater than oneself, one may heroically give up their right to choose for the sake of a grander purpose, such as fighting to provide that right to personal agency to other people as well. *The Testaments* presents the concept of women's choice and agency as a complex issue: though it is a critical human right and an injustice when one's choice and agency are denied, in some circumstances one may nobly sacrifice it for a greater good.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in blue text throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BABY NICOLE

Baby Nicole works as a dual symbol: for the Mayday movement she represents female liberation, while for the people of Gilead, she represents the threat of the outside world. Since Baby Nicole was smuggled out of Gilead by her Handmaid mother and Mayday operatives, Canada's anti-Gilead movement views Baby Nicole as a symbol of liberation for women in Gilead, pasting her infant likeness on protest posters even 15 years after she was smuggled out and disappeared. Gilead, on the other hand, views the smuggling of Nicole as a theft and kidnapping—her legal father was a Commander and thus has the legal right to her in the eyes of the state. Even for women in Gilead, Baby Nicole thus represents the evils of the outside world, who mercilessly stole a baby child from her rightful family. Like the protest movement, Gilead still refers to her as Baby Nicole, even though she has not been a baby for 15 years.

However, in treating her like an icon—calling her Baby Nicole rather than realizing that she is now Nicole the young adult with her own personhood and agency—both sides effectively dehumanize her. This is particularly evident when Daisy learns that she herself is Nicole, the icon she has seen both sides fight over and claim as a symbolic token for themselves. This makes Nicole feel used, handled "like a football" rather than a human being. Baby Nicole the icon thus ultimately represents the manner in which one can dehumanize another by trying to claim them as a symbol for a movement or ideology, rather than regard them as a human being who ought to be free to make their own choices.

THE WALL

The Wall encircles the city in which the story is set and functions as a symbol of Gilead's authoritarian power and control over its citizens. The Wall's representation works both physically and psychologically. Physically, the Wall makes it far more difficult for people to escape from the city, since they are enclosed and must either climb it or pass through multiple Angel checkpoints to make their escape. Psychologically, the Wall is a constant reminder of Gilead's threat of severe punishment, since executed criminals are often hung from the Wall and left there for the public to see. The Wall's physical enclosure is thus reinforced by the

psychological enclosure Gilead inflicts upon its citizens, threatening such extreme punishment that people are kept in a constant state of fear, too afraid to question Gilead's right to rule or speak out about its injustices.

When Nicole, posing with Agnes as a Pearl Girl, escapes to Canada, Aunt Lydia tells Helena that she must've climbed the Wall. Although this is technically a lie, since Nicole passed through the gates and the checkpoints in disguise, symbolically it is the truth: Nicole has managed to overcome both the physical and mental confines of Gilead and is running toward freedom in Canada, armed with Lydia's damning cache of information about Gilead's injustices.

BROWN ROBES

The brown robes that the Sons of Jacob force cooperating women to wear represent submission and female oppression in Gilead. The robes are a sign of the women's penitence, their admission of guilt for being women professionals and not respecting their narrow, gendered roles. The robes are made of a material similar to sackcloth, which is a reference to the sackcloth many figures in the biblical Old Testament periodically wear to symbolize their penitence for sinning against God and their desire to repent. When Lydia is arrested by the Sons of Jacob and brought to the stadium with the other professional women, she sees women participating in the executions of other women. These female executioners are dressed in the brown sackcloth robes, which symbolizes their acquiescence to the new regime and acceptance of its gender roles—even at the cost of their fellow women's lives. After Lydia is tortured and forced to cooperate, she is left the same brown robe to wear, which she may don as a sign of her cooperation and penitence for trying to resist—for being modern and professional rather than the meek, subordinate woman that the Sons of Jacob demand. However, since donning the brown robe allows Lydia and its other wearers to live, the brown robe is also a mark of a survivor.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Nan A. Talese edition of *The Testaments* published in 2019.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ Hanging from a belt around my waist is a taser. This weapon reminds me of my failings: had I been more effective, I would not have needed such an implement.

Related Characters: Aunt Lydia (speaker), Aunt Vidala

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In Lydia's opening narration, she watches as a statue in her honor is unveiled, noting that the sculptor has included the taser hanging on her belt, which symbolizes her often authoritarian rule. The fact that Lydia is being immortalized during her own lifetime speaks to the fact that she has become an almost mythic figure in Gilead despite being a woman in an oppressively patriarchal system. It's clear by Lydia's implied political status and the taser that the statue is meant to be a symbol of fear and power. However, recognizing her own private regret and even feelings of guilt for having had to resort to violence importantly establishes her as someone who wields power and often inflicts violence, but does not necessarily enjoy either of these things and would prefer not to hurt people. This immediately sets Lydia up as a complex protagonist, an anti-hero who uses unheroic, even disturbing means to achieve a heroic goal. This also sets Lydia apart from her rival, Vidala, who seeks to wiled as much power as Lydia herself does but takes a sadistic joy in inflicting fear and suffering on others, especially when she is allowed to torture.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ Whatever our shapes and features, we were snares and enticements despite ourselves, we were the innocent and blameless causes that through our very nature could make men drunk with lust, so that they'd stagger and lurch and topple over the verge.

Related Characters: Agnes Jemima / Aunt Victoria (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Agnes begins her narration from the time she is six or seven years old, by which point she and her classmates are already being taught that their value is primarily as sexual objects and that their bodies are dangerous things because they are potently alluring to men. Agnes's introduction to the way children are raised in Gilead immediately establishes the manner in which fear and threats of violence are used to sexually and socially repress women, even from a very young age. It is disturbing enough to be threatening young

girls with rape at such a young age, and more disturbing yet to teach those same girls that whatever terrible things a man might to do them are effectively their own fault; they are guilty simply by existing in a woman's body. This not only places a weighty and fearful burden on very young girls that should be free to simply enjoy their childhood unburdened but absolves men from taking responsibility for their hurtful actions and their inability to regulate their own behavior. Women and young girls effectively become the scapegoat for men's sexual misconduct.

Chapter 6 Quotes

I've become swollen with power, true, but also nebulous with it—formless, shape-shifting. I am everywhere and nowhere: even in the minds of the Commanders I cast an unsettling shadow. How can I regain myself? How to shrink back to my normal size, the size of an ordinary woman?

Related Characters: Aunt Lydia (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

Lydia reflects on her own journey and rise to power, feeling that she has evolved into something more fearsome and far-reaching than herself, becoming an infamous legend and a predatory figure. On the one hand, Lydia's statement again reflects the fact that as a woman, she has grown to such power that even the Commanders, the most powerful men in Gilead, fear her, which thus demonstrates the great degree of power that the right knowledge utilized in the right ways can grant. However, Lydia also suggests that she is losing her personal self, Lydia the human being, amidst the great presence of Lydia the mythic figure. Although she does not say so explicitly, the undertone of Lydia's regret as that her infamy and legacy have made her a villain she never intended to be. This seems to hearken back to Atwood's preceding novel, The Handmaid's Tale, in which Lydia was only seen as an archetypal villain. By mourning her own mythological presence, Lydia seems to suggest that although to many, such as the Handmaids, she has seemed only the embodiment of Gilead's evil power, that is not who she truly is, or at least who she meant to become.

Chapter 8 Quotes

I'd basically disliked Baby Nicole since I'd had to do a paper on her. I'd got a C because I'd said she was being used as a football by both sides, and it would be the greatest happiness of the greatest number just to give her back.

Related Characters: Nicole / Daisy / Jade (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

Before Nicole learns that she herself is the grown-up Baby Nicole, she still believes that her real name is Daisy. Daisy resents Baby Nicole. The infant has become a symbolic icon both for Gilead (representing the evil immorality of the outside world, whom they believe stole Baby Nicole from Gilead), and for Canada's anti-Gilead resistance (who sees her as a symbol of hope and the possibility of escape and liberation for Gilead's oppressed women). Daisy rightly recognizes that Baby Nicole, the symbol, is not recognized as a real human being by either side of the conflict, but only a concept of sorts used to motivate their respective agendas. This is particularly apparent in the fact that both sides still refer to her as Baby Nicole, even though she was smuggled out of Gilead 15 years ago. Thus, both Gilead and the anti-Gilead movement dehumanize Baby Nicole, allowing her only to be a symbol and never accounting for the fact that she is now a teenager somewhere with her own opinions and personality and agency, and that she may not actually want to be made an iconic symbol for either side of the conflict. Although Daisy astutely recognizes this, however, she similarly dehumanizes Baby Nicole (not yet realizing that she herself is Nicole) by arguing that to appease the most people, she ought to simply go back to Gilead, regardless of what Nicole the human being desires for herself.

Chapter 12 Quotes

I know too much about the leaders—too much dirt—and they are uncertain as to what I may have done with it in the way of documentation. If they string me up, will that dirt somehow be leaked? They might well suspect I've taken back up precautions, and they would be right.

Related Characters: Aunt Lydia (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

Aunt Lydia describes the primary source of her own power and method of her survival as one of the most feared—and sometimes hated—individuals in Gilead: she knows too much about powerful figures at every level of Gilead's government. In this way, Lydia embodies the thematic argument that knowledge is power, and that the right knowledge leveraged against the right people can not only grant power over others, but also provide an avenue for survival even in such an oppressive regime as Gilead. Although Lydia is a woman in a society that oppresses women and makes ever effort to subjugate them, and although she does not command military forces, her keen ability to listen and learn secrets that were meant to be kept hidden makes her a fearsome and surviving figure. Further, it demonstrates that women can wield certain forms of power even within a system designed to render them powerless.

Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ Her name was Ofkyle, since my father's name was Commander Kyle. "Her name would have been something else earlier," said Shunammite. "Some other man's. They get passed around until they have a baby. They're all sluts anyway, they don't need real names."

Related Characters: Agnes Jemima / Aunt Victoria , Shunammite (speaker), Handmaid Ofkyle / Crystal

Related Themes:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

Agnes recalls the arrival of Handmaid Ofkyle into her father's house. Although Handmaids feature prominently in Atwood's preceding novel, The Handmaid's Tale, Ofkyle is the only Handmaid given character development in The Testaments. Ofkyle demonstrates the social stigma and shame that comes with being a woman tasked with having multiple sex partners for the sake of bearing children. Ofkyle's name—literally "Of Kyle"—denotes the manner in which such women are treated as commodities, temporary properties to be passed between men once they've fulfilled their purpose—utilities rather than human beings. This not only models Gilead's horrific treatment of women, but also the social stigma society has attached to sexuality.

Shunammite's open disdain and shaming of Handmaids thus suggests that not only do men in Gilead despise and disregard women, but such social stigmas even infect the minds of children at an early age—even girls, whom once could reasonably expect to take greater pity on the Handmaids' unjust suffering since they themselves could one day face the same fate. Shunammite's foul behavior and treatment of Handmaids thus argues that even when only one level of society (men, in this case) attach stigma and open disdain to women's sexuality, such stigma can filter down and infect every level of that society, even the minds of young children, turning them cruel and intolerant.

Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ Aunt Estee [...] always put things in a positive light. That was a talent women had because of their special brains, which were not hard and focused like the brains of men but soft and damp and warm and enveloping, like...like what? [Aunt Estee] didn't finish the sentence.

Like warmed-up mud in the sun, I thought. That what was inside my head: warmed-up mud.

Related Characters: Agnes Jemima / Aunt Victoria (speaker), Aunt Estée

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

Agnes reflects on what sort of brain she must have as a woman. From a young age, Agnes is taught that men and women are divided into strict gender roles, with men being capable and intelligent and good at leading and operating, and woman being infantile and simple, good only for bearing children, sewing, or cooking. Such narrowly defined gender roles are justified, according to Gilead's leadership, because of fundamental biological differences in men and women's brains. Beyond being obviously untrue, Agnes's feeling that she has only a pile of warm mud for a brain suggests that teaching women to accept such narrow, simple roles for themselves causes them to have a fundamentally lesser view of their capabilities. Within such an argument, teaching strict gender roles as they do in Gilead or in many religious fundamentalist communities goes beyond conservativism—it artificially limits women and their potential by conditioning to think less of their own abilities and lower their goals, even though they're likely just as

capable and intelligent as men.

Chapter 18 Quotes

The truth was that they'd cut Crystal open to get the baby out, and they'd killed her by doing that. It wasn't something she chose. She hadn't volunteered to die with noble womanly honor or be a shining example, but nobody mentioned that.

Related Characters: Agnes Jemima / Aunt Victoria (speaker), Commander Kyle, Handmaid Ofkyle / Crystal

Related Themes:

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

When Handmaid Ofkyle—whose name Agnes later discovered was Crystal, which Agnes decides to remember her by—dies in childbirth after a doctor cuts her open to receive the baby, Agnes's family holds a funeral. Here, people praise her heroism and noble sacrifice of herself for the sake of of her baby. However, Agnes recognizes that Crystal was never given a choice in the matter but recognized only as the Handmaid whose sole purpose in life was to bear children, a mere utility. This lack of choice or personal agency afforded to Crystal is fundamentally dehumanizing, since it reflects that Gilead regards her not as a human being with free agency, but only as a fertile womb. Agnes's remembrance of Crystal by her given name rather than her Handmaid name shows that Agnes is remembering her as the human being that she was, despite being dehumanized by everyone else and defined solely by her subservient role to Agnes's father, Commander Kyle. By regarding Crystal as Crystal and not merely the Handmaid Ofkyle, Agnes easily recognizes the injustice of sacrificing Crystal without giving her a choice and the fraud of regarding it as a noble sacrifice rather than an unjust and unnecessary death inflicted on her. For Agnes, Crystal's death also marks the beginning of her recognition that as a woman in Gilead, she is afforded no choice and no agency to govern her own life.

Chapter 20 Quotes

To pass the time I berated myself. Stupid, stupid, stupid: I'd believed all that claptrap about life, liberty, democracy, and the rights of the individual I'd soaked up at law school. There were eternal verities and we would always defend them. I'd depended on that as if on a magical charm.

Related Characters: Aunt Lydia (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

Aunt Lydia recalls Gilead's early days, when the Sons of Jacob destroyed the United States Congress and launched a coup and arrested scores of professional women like Lydia to marry off, co-opt, or execute. Lydia's realization that it was foolish to believe that democracy and human rights would always exist and be protected is an obvious and chilling warning to the reader, who likely lives under such protections themselves and may take them for granted. By setting her dystopian vision of America in the near future rather than several centuries away, the author Margaret Atwood highlights how quickly life can change, rights can be eroded, and how thin the line between democracy and authoritarianism can be. Lydia's regret offers a flat, straightforward warning to the reader to always be wary of the slow erosion of human rights, especially women's rights, since such things are not permanent fixtures or eternal "verities." Such rights and liberties were hard-won and have exited for a relatively short amount of time—it's not unreasonable to think they could be taken away again.

Chapter 24 Quotes

I did not wish Aunt Sally dead: I simply wished her incoherent; and so it has been. The Margery Kempe Retreat House has a discreet staff.

Related Characters: Aunt Lydia (speaker), Aunt Sally

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 139-140

Explanation and Analysis

When Aunt Sally returns from her Pearl Girl mission with information on Baby Nicole's whereabouts, Lydia realizes that she needs to permanently silence Sally or risk her cooperation with Mayday and plot to bring down Gilead being exposed. The implication of Lydia's statement is that the retreat house stuff did not kill Aunt Sally's body, but effectively destroyed her mind, which demonstrates the lengths not only of Gilead's horrific authoritarian practices, but also Aunt Lydia's ruthlessness as one of its most

powerful figures as well as its single most dangerous opponent. Lydia ruins Sally's mind, and thus her life, for the ultimate aim of overthrowing Gilead because of its oppressive practices, and yet to do so she participates in those authoritarian measures and employs them herself. In this way, Lydia occupies a complex, morally ambiguous position as a protagonist, playing both the hero and the villain even in pursuit of an ultimately heroic goal.

Chapter 25 Quotes

❝ But the goal in every instance was the same: girls of all kinds—those from good families as well as the less favored—were to be married early, before any chance encounter with an unsuitable man might occur that would lead to what used to be called falling in love or, worse, to loss of virginity.

Related Characters: Agnes Jemima / Aunt Victoria (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

While Agnes explains the circumstances of her own arranged marriage, she notes that every girl in Gilead, regardless of class, is expected to marry as soon as possible to avoid perceived immorality. Agnes's observation is significant not only because it clarifies that her own experience of arranged marriage and sexual repression are consistent across all of Gilead, regardless of class—since the novel only depicts daughters of elite families—but suggests that marriage itself can be used as a tool of sexual repression. Gilead employs all manner of techniques to make young women fear their sexuality and their own bodies, apparently because women are more easily controlled when they are repressed in every way possible, and early marriage is included in these as well.

Agnes's recognition of falling in love and sex outside of marriage as serious crimes in Gilead further suggests that Gilead fears women having their own experiences as individuals—they are forbidden from having the chance to discover themselves, what kind of people they are attracted to, that sex can be enjoyable and so on, since such realization would arguably and reasonably lead women to demand their own rights and autonomy as human beings. Such enlightened, self-aware women would naturally prove difficult for Gilead to control and subdue.

Chapter 27 Quotes

❝ [Becka] really did believe that marriage would obliterate her. She would be crushed, she would be nullified, she would be melted like snow until nothing remained of her.

Related Characters: Agnes Jemima / Aunt Victoria (speaker), Becka / Aunt Immortelle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

Faced with the prospect of an arranged marriage, Becka is horrified by the idea and thinks that marriage to an older man, a stranger, will completely destroy her. Becka's fear is not of physical death so much as it is of the utter eradication of her sense of self—she believes that complying to such a marriage will destroy her ability to choose and have agency over her own life, which shapes her self-concept. For Becka, having her own choice and desires to not marry overridden will mean being forced into an unwanted marriage for the rest of her life. She, like other young women forced into arranged marriages, will be locked into the limited role of a wife and nothing more, expected to be submissive and deferential to her husband regardless of how kind or monstrous he is. This seems the death of her own autonomy and agency, that which allows her to feel like a human being and not a possession or a thing. While Becka's fear does not suggest that all marriage necessarily obliterates a woman's sense of agency and personhood, it does argue that any relationship or role that is forced upon a woman and that overrules her choice and power to govern herself will inevitably kills her sense of her own and value, eradicating her right to be an individual.

Chapter 29 Quotes

❝ What good is it to throw yourself in front of a steamroller out of moral principles and then be crushed flat like a sock emptied of its foot? Better to fade into the crowd, the piously-praising, unctuous, hate-mongering crowd. Better to hurl rocks than have them hurled at you. Or better for your chances of staying alive.

Related Characters: Aunt Lydia (speaker), Anita

Related Themes:

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

As Lydia recalls the early days of Gilead and her own eventual cooperation with the Sons of Jacob, which required her to participate in a firing squad executing a group of women—including her friend Anita, who apparently stuck to their principles. Lydia rationalizes her decision to cooperate with Gilead and contribute to its reign rather than maintain her principles and be executed as well. Lydia's character development and arc are laced with difficult questions about survival and morality for which the novel pointedly refuses to provide clear answers. Chief among these is whether Lydia, who ultimately destroys Gilead, was right to cooperate with the Sons of Jacob and help them develop Gilead's control over women. On the one hand, Lydia could have stuck to her principles like Anita and been executed, erased from history but with her virtue intact, which is arguably the more ethically driven option. On the other hand, although Lydia herself committed many atrocities against women and participated in Gilead's oppression, she also slowly seeded the beginnings of Gilead's ruin—had she not helped orchestrate Gilead's rise to power, her position may have been taken by someone else with less noble long-term intentions.

Chapter 32 Quotes

"Gilead's not shy about killing," said Ada. "They're fanatics." She said they were supposed to be dedicated to virtuous godly living, but you could believe you were living virtuously and also murder people if you were a fanatic.

Related Characters: Nicole / Daisy / Jade, Ada (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

Ada tells Nicole that they'll need to train her in self-defense in preparation for her mission into Gilead, since despite Gilead's religious pretensions, they do a lot of killing. Ada's observation highlights the hypocrisy of Gilead or any such religious or theocratic system that espouses moral virtues on the one hand yet commits violence on the other. Such fanatical people learn to justify their violence with their virtues, rather than seeing the contradiction inherent between them. This suggests that this is one of the great risks of any theocracy or religiously-justified authoritarian power: when a government and its followers are both committed to power and some ideal of moral purity at the same time, one inevitably feeds into the other, and violence ironically becomes a tool to enforce morality. Although this is arguably self-defeating, fanatical religious zeal can so bend one's perspective that anything that will ensure adherence to the ordained religious ideology, even brutal violence and oppression, becomes a justified act—a necessary sacrifice.

Chapter 34 Quotes

But if we were to put too much emphasis on the theoretical delights of sex, the result would almost certainly be curiosity and experimentation, followed by moral degeneracy and public stonings.

Related Characters: Aunt Lydia (speaker), Becka / Aunt Immortelle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

After Becka's fear of sex causes her to attempt suicide rather than submit to her arranged marriage, Lydia muses to herself that perhaps they should change they way they educate young girls about sexuality. Lydia's wariness of teaching about the pleasures of sexuality, which seems dangerous in that it could stimulate curiosity. This demonstrates the manner in which Gilead, or any institution that desires to control women, can repress them through teaching them to be fearful of their own sexuality, quashing any impulse for them to discover their natural desires or find any enjoyment in sex. Gilead's social structure is engineered to keep women in a narrowly defined and gendered roles, ideally viewing themselves less as fully-fledged human beings with their own thoughts and ideas than as future wives to men. Lydia's fear thus suggests that such sexual curiosity and the resultant self-discovery would encourage women to branch out in all manner of different ways, perhaps discovering that they do not need or want to remain confined within Gilead's ideas of what women should be.

Chapter 40 Quotes

"Perhaps one day you will be able to help me as you yourself have been helped. Good should be repaid with good. That is one of our rules of thumb, here at Ardua Hall."

Related Characters: Aunt Lydia (speaker), Agnes Jemima / Aunt Victoria , Commander Judd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 247

Explanation and Analysis

After Aunt Lydia rescues Agnes from her arranged marriage to Commander Judd by making her an Aunt, and thus no longer allowed to be married, Agnes thanks Lydia profusely and Lydia responds that someday she may call on Agnes to help her instead. This interaction encapsulates much of Lydia's character, demonstrating that she is both compassionate and cunning, helping others while developing the machinations of her own plot against Gilead. This is evident in that, although Lydia rescues Agnes out of her own compassion and sympathy—literally saving her life, since Judd habitually murders his wives—she also already reckons that the gratitude Agnes feels towards her for may prove useful in the future for her own plans. Importantly, although Lydia is most often depicted using her cunning and knowledge of other's misdeed to blackmail others into protecting her or doing things they don't want to do, Lydia's saving of Agnes while realizing that she will someday utilize her to help bring down Gilead demonstrates a more positive use of Lydia's skills to manipulate events and control others.

Chapter 41 Quotes

❝ Becka had decided to offer up this silent suffering of hers as a sacrifice to God. I am not sure what God though of this, but it did not do the trick for me. Once a judge, always a judge. I judged, I pronounced the sentence.

Related Characters: Aunt Lydia (speaker), Agnes Jemima / Aunt Victoria , Becka / Aunt Immortelle, Dr. Grove

Related Themes:

Page Number: 253

Explanation and Analysis

Although Becka was unwilling to tell Aunt Lydia about her childhood sexual abuse, Lydia eventually learns of it by eavesdropping (through her surveillance microphones) on a private conversation between Becka and Agnes. Becka describes to Agnes how her father, Dr. Grove, abused her from the age of four. This interaction, and Lydia's surreptitious observation of it, once again display the moral complexity of Lydia's character. Lydia arguably commits an illicit act and invasion of Becka's privacy by listening in in what should have been a private conversation, especially since Becka herself could have told Lydia about the abuse and decided not to. Even so, Lydia uses this discovery and her wide scope of power to ultimately bring Dr. Grove to justice, framing him for a rape he did not commit so that he would be executed for the many sex crimes he did commit. In this manner, Lydia demonstrates that the power she wields through dangerous and illicit knowledge can ultimately be used for good, in this case to bring a pedophile to justice and prevent him from abusing any more girls, even though the manner in which she gathered such information is undeniably sinister and arguably wrong. As always, Lydia's character is complex and dynamic, neither archetypally heroic nor archetypally villainous, but a mixture of the two that leans toward ultimately noble goals.

Chapter 44 Quotes

❝ Aunt Beatrice ordered in pizza for lunch, which we had with ice cream from the freezer. I said I was surprised that they were eating junk food: wasn't Gilead against it, especially for women?

"It's part of our tests as Pearl Girls," said Aunt Dove. "We're supposed to sample the fleshpot temptations of the outside world in order to understand them, and then reject them in our hearts." She took another bite of pizza.

Related Characters: Nicole / Daisy / Jade, Aunt Dove (speaker), Commander Judd, Aunt Beatrice

Related Themes:

Page Number: 269

Explanation and Analysis

After Jade is picked up by Pearl Girls in Toronto, she goes back to their condo with them to prepare for her trip into Gilead. While they are in the condo, the Aunts order pizza and eat ice cream, which seems to Jade to be a breach of Gilead's protocol. Aunt Dove's claim that they are only trying out the junk food of the outside world so that they can virtuously set their hearts against it is obviously false, since both Aunts seem to genuinely be enjoying the pizza rather than begrudgingly tolerating it. Although this instance of their lapse of virtue is in itself harmless, it signals the greater problem of Gilead: although the Pearl Girls claim to be pious and virtuous, they still swayed by material pleasures like modern junk food, and so they must mentally readjust and lie to themselves to maintain their sense of their own piety.

In a far darker and more sinister fashion, Gilead's male leadership goes to great lengths to preserve their image of piety and righteousness, and yet cannot themselves abstain from the things that they teach are immoral: sex, alcohol, and illicit pleasures. This hypocrisy not only forces Gilead's leadership to make shameful justifications for their own vices so they can maintain their pious image. This is most evident in Commander Judd's murders of his wives as soon as they are old enough to no longer arouse him, so that he can justify his pedophilia and desire for newer younger girls by saying that he is still within the bounds of wedlock.

Chapter 46 Quotes

The Angel's real crime was not [smuggling] the lemons, however: he'd been accused of taking bribes from Mayday and aiding several Handmaids in their successful flight across our various borders. But the Commanders did not want this fact publicized: it would give people ideas. The official line is that there were no corrupt Angels and certainly no fleeing Handmaids; for why would one renounce God's kingdom to plunge into the flaming pit?

Related Characters: Aunt Lydia (speaker), Commander Judd

Related Themes:

Page Number: 278

Explanation and Analysis

Aunt Lydia and Commander Judd watch the public execution of an Angel who collaborated with Mayday to smuggle Handmaids out of Gilead, though Gilead officially only charged him with black market dealing. The fact that Gilead feels the need to level false charges against the Angel and conceal the fact that so many people are fleeing Gilead demonstrates a different angle on the concept of knowledge and power. The fact that people want to leave Gilead at all obviously contradicts its claims to be a virtuous utopian paradise, revealing it instead as a hellish authoritarian pit. The simple knowledge of this reality and the fact that many people do successfully escape could lead others to do so. Thus, that knowledge, were it to be disseminated, represents yet another threat to Gilead's power, exposing the weaknesses and flaws in a system that is supposedly perfect and strong. Although Gilead's efforts to suppress the truth about its citizens and especially its Handmaids emigrating out of the country may be successful in the short term, any government—whether Gilead or a real-life regime—that has to constantly convince its citizens that they are not unhappy seems ultimately doomed to fail, as only so many millions if people can be kept quiet for so long.

Chapter 48 Quotes

"She wanted to live on her own and work on a farm. Aunt Elizabeth and Aunt Vidala said this is what came of reading too early: she'd picked up the wrong ideas at the Hildegard Library, before her mind had been strengthened enough to reject them, and there were a lot o f questionable books that should be destroyed."

Related Characters: Becka / Aunt Immortelle (speaker), Agnes Jemima / Aunt Victoria , Aunt Vidala, Aunt Elizabeth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 293

Explanation and Analysis

During Agnes's early months in Ardua Hall among the Aunts, Becka tells her about a girl whom the Aunts rejected after she decided she didn't want to be an Aunt or be married but would rather live alone on a farm like the ones she'd read about. Aunt Vidala's thought that it is dangerous to teach a woman to read before her "mind had been strengthened enough to reject" any new ideas again demonstrates that knowledge is power, and new knowledge thus threatens Gilead's power and control over women by showing them that a different, freer world exists beyond Gilead's borders. The idea that one must be sufficiently indoctrinated so they can reject new ideas as soon as they meet them is one of the hallmarks of fundamentalism, religious or otherwise, in which one determines the truth of something not on its own merits, but on whether it fits their own preconceived notion, beliefs, or doctrines. Once again, Gilead is paradoxically a society that is threatened by women reading but also dependent on the Aunts as intelligent women to help run society—a contradiction that seems ultimately doomed to fail.

Chapter 49 Quotes

Being able to read and write did not provide answers to all questions. It led to other questions, and then to others.

Related Characters: Agnes Jemima / Aunt Victoria (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 299

Explanation and Analysis

As Agnes learns to read as new Aunt and progresses through material, she realizes that literature poses more questions than it answers. Agnes's observation rightly suggests that literature does not always answer questions but often poses new ones, which then pushes the reader to further investigate and formulate their own answers. While this is an important process for developing critical thought, such questioning is incredibly dangerous to Gilead's control over its people. As with any fundamentalist or authoritarian system, questions pose an extreme danger because adherents are bound to eventually question the authority that is used to justify the entire system itself. Critical thought cannot be tolerated because the system or belief itself does not hold up to scrutiny, such as if Agnes began to question why men should necessarily be more important than women, since women are apparently capable of the same level of thought as men. This is thus the great danger that literacy poses to Gilead and the reason that it enforces ignorance on as many women as possible.

Chapter 50 Quotes

❝ "God isn't what they say," [Becka] said. She said you could believe in Gilead or you could believe in God, but not both.

Related Characters: Agnes Jemima / Aunt Victoria , Becka / Aunt Immortelle (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 304

Explanation and Analysis

Aunts are not allowed to read the Bible until several years after they've learned to read and have been trained on elementary texts, and they are strictly forbidden from discussing what they read. As Agnes is about to be granted access to read the Bible for herself, Becka warns her that Gilead does not preach it as it is written. Becka's statement that one can believe in either God as described in the Bible or God as described by Gilead, but not both, implies that the Bible's description of God and Gilead's description of God are fundamentally different and mutually exclusive. This statement thus firmly argues that although the entire story criticizes theocracies and the use of religion to uphold an authoritarian rule, it is not criticizing Christianity itself or even religion at large. Although the Bible, the source text of Christianity, is used as the basis for Gilead's oppressive regime, this seems to be simply because the Bible would be the most familiar major religious text to a North American audience, which is likely where the majority of Atwood's readers reside (she herself is Canadian). Becka's belief that Gilead does not embody the Bible thus suggests that the story is a criticism of bastardizing religion and militarizing it for the sake of power, rather than criticizing practice of the religion itself.

Chapter 51 Quotes

❝ This is what the Aunts did, I was learning. They recorded. They waited. They used their information to achieve goals known only to themselves. Their weapons were powerful but contaminating secrets, as the Marthas had always said.

Related Characters: Agnes Jemima / Aunt Victoria (speaker), Aunt Lydia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 309

Explanation and Analysis

As Aunt Lydia begins leaving criminal files for all of Gilead's leadership on Agnes's work desk, Agnes realizes that within all of these closely guarded secrets and knowledge of criminal acts lies the Aunts' true power, and it is vast and far-reaching. Interestingly, this form of power that the Aunts wield differs in quality and method to the power that the men in Gilead possess. The male leadership wields their weighty, militaristic might through the Angels and thus establish a fearful, but blunt, reputation for themselves. But the Aunts' power through knowledge, which is arguably at least as potent as the Angels' militaristic power, is quiet and patient. This is particularly evident in the fact that all of this criminal evidence exists and yet is not yet put into action—it is being patiently saved until it the time is right. And yet it is such quiet, patient power that ultimately begins Gilead's collapse when Lydia's trove of document is released, suggesting that the power knowledge grants is at least as powerful as any military force, and is available to women even when weapons, physical strength, or social influence are lacking.

Chapter 56 Quotes

❝ Was my soft, muddy brain hardening? Was I becoming stony, steely, pitiless? Was I exchanging my caring and pliable woman's nature for an imperfect copy of a sharp-edged and ruthless man's nature? I didn't want that, but how to avoid it if I aspired to be an Aunt?

Related Characters: Agnes Jemima / Aunt Victoria (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 328

Explanation and Analysis

As Agnes continues to read criminal files and learn more about the dirty inner workings of Gilead's top leadership, she wonders if the "soft" brain she's been taught that she has is becoming hard, like a man's. Agnes's ability to change from the role of a potential wife to an Aunt who reads, studies, and plans like only men are supposedly able to do suggests that there is no biological difference between men and women's brains, contrary to what Gilead teaches. Thus, there is no actual justification for narrow and strictly-enforced gender roles. However, the fact that Agnes holds onto this concept of her brain as "soft" and "muddy" suggests that the low estimation of her own intelligence she was raised to have still lingers. Rather than simply recognize that her brain has always been as good as any man's Agnes still feels pressured to try to fit her newly realized intelligence into Gilead's social construct, believing that her brain is changing into a hardened, capable form, rather than that it has always been in such condition. Additionally, the fact that Agnes does not want to become "sharp-edged and ruthless" suggests that she values her sense of compassion and gentleness, branded as woman's traits though arguably accessible to both men and women. Even if Agnes were to fully accept the capability of her own mind, it seems likely that due to social conventions and the way she was raised, she would still want to fit at least partially into society's construct of what a woman is.

Chapter 62 Quotes

❝ As we went north, the friendliness decreased: there were angry looks, and I had the feeling that our Pearl Girls mission and even the whole Gilead thing was leaking popularity. No one spat at us, but they scowled as if they would like to.

Related Characters: Nicole / Daisy / Jade (speaker), Aunt Lydia, Agnes Jemima / Aunt Victoria

Related Themes:

Page Number: 362

Explanation and Analysis

As Jade and Agnes make their escape toward Canada, posing as Pearl Girls embarking on their mission, Jade notices that the admiration and respect their uniforms garnered from citizens fades the farther into the rural country they go. Although Jade can clearly see that the citizens are growing in their disdain for Gilead and openly scowl at her, this actually suggests a hopeful message. The disdain for Gilead Jade sees in their faces seems bound to foment into rebellion, and the story's epilogue even reveals that Gilead is plagued by local rebellions which help to topple the regime. Although Aunt Lydia's document cache sparks much of this rebellion, the looks that Jade sees suggests that it was only a matter of time before such rebellion was ignited anyway. For both Gilead and for actual authoritarian states in modern history, this suggests that any regime which actively oppresses its people and keeps them unhappy is bound to hindered and even brought down by popular revolts. As is ultimately the case in Gilead, any such authoritarian state cannot last forever, since the people will inevitably rise up and take it down.

Chapter 67 Quotes

❝ I was finding it easier now to go up and down the ladder that led to our sleeping quarters, and reflected that it would have been much harder in a long skirt.

Related Characters: Agnes Jemima / Aunt Victoria (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 380

Explanation and Analysis

As Agnes climbs the ladder of The Nellie J. Banks, wearing denim jeans which she initially found scandalous and nearly blasphemous, she realizes that what she'd once considered men's clothing allows her much greater ease of movement. Agnes's realization that jeans are far easier for her to move around in than her traditional, modest women's skirt works as a brief but noteworthy representation of how she will be freed and able to act and think more confidently and capably as she unburdens herself from Gilead's narrow and confining gender roles. In the same way that pants make it easier for Agnes to quickly climb up and down a ladder than

she could in a skirt, the more that she frees herself from the belief that her woman's brain is softer and slower than a man's, the quicker and abler she will be able to operate and move about the world.

Chapter 68 Quotes

❝ I had a flashback, not for the first time. In my brown sackcloth robe I raised the gun, aimed, shot. A bullet, or no bullet?

A bullet.

Related Characters: Aunt Lydia (speaker), Becka / Aunt Immortelle, Commander Judd

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 391

Explanation and Analysis

As Lydia's plot enters its final stages and her document cache makes its way to Canada, she meets with Judd. While they are speaking and she is trying to maintain her appearance of innocence, her mind flashes back to the day that she stood in the stadium as part of the firing squad and executed another woman. Judd once tried to console her by telling Lydia that her rifle only had a blank round, but in this instance, she decides that her rifle fired an actual bullet. Lydia's conviction that she fired a bullet suggests that in these final hours, she is accepting her role as a shameless killer, accepting both the burden and responsibility of the lives her plan has risked and cost. Lydia is deciding once and for all to be ruthless until her plan is complete. This is a significant moment in her character arc, since until now she has been unable to completely accept responsibility for the deaths she has caused; when Becka sacrificed her life for the sake of Lydia's plan, Lydia momentarily deflected the guilt by reassuring herself that it was Becka's choice, even though Lydia unavoidably swept her up into it. In what could be her final hours, Lydia's decision that she was a killer from the moment she held the gun in the stadium suggests that she is accepting the full weight of responsibility for all the harm, pain, and death she has caused over her Gilead career, regardless of her motivations.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: ARDUA HALL HOLOGRAPH

Nine years before this writing, Aunt Lydia attends the unveiling ceremony of a large statue in her honor, though it is very rare for anyone to have a statue made of them while they are still alive. In the sculpture, a Handmaid and a Pearl Girl stand at her sides, and a taser hangs from her belt. The taser only reminds the real Lydia that she has failed in many of her efforts, since otherwise it would not have been a necessary tool. Now, nine years after its unveiling, the statue is spotted with moss and bird droppings.

Lydia's introduction through the unveiling ceremony for her own statue immediately establishes her as a powerful, even mythic figure among her people. The taser on her belt suggests that she's used forced and inflicted pain throughout her life, while the fact that she views the taser as a mark of failure suggests that she regrets such acts of force and would rather have achieved her aims without them.

Lydia writes from her inner sanctum in Ardua Hall's library—one of the few libraries to survive the "enthusiastic book burnings" that have been sweeping the country. Lydia writes her manuscript away from prying eyes and surveillance cameras, and wonders if anyone will ever have the chance to read it.

Book burnings summon an image of the past—this practice was common under Nazi Germany, the Spanish Inquisition, and other oppressive regimes. By contrast, surveillance cameras are undeniably modern, suggesting that Gilead is a conflicting combination of old-world practices and beliefs with modern technology and power.

CHAPTER 2: TRANSCRIPT OF WITNESS TESTIMONY 369A

Agnes states that her audience has asked her to recount her childhood in Gilead, and remarks that she still has fond memories of some aspects of it, even though she thinks Gilead ought to fade away and is "surely contrary to what God intended."

Agnes's opinion that Gilead is not "what God intended" immediately establishes religious corruption and abuse of power as a primary theme within the novel. Although not much has been revealed about life in Gilead, Agnes's words imply that although its citizenry may be devoutly religious, it is a corrupt, immoral society at its core.

As children, Agnes and her peers wear dresses color-coded to the season. They are careful that their hems and sleeves cover the proscribed length and do not show any skin, since men's sexual urges are uncontrollable. According to Aunt Vidala (who is frightening and strict), if the little girls show too much skin, men may be overwhelmed by these urges. They will attack the girls, steal their "treasure" and their beauty, and tear off their little flower petals. Aunt Estée, who is kind, tries to soften this message and claims that men are not altogether so bad. But Agnes has nightmares about Aunt Vidala's vision of assault and robbery and fears the day she will be arranged into a marriage.

Vidala's fiery teaching and Agnes's fears demonstrate the manner in which can be weaponized to sexually repress women from a young age, particularly by teaching them that they are responsible for the horrible actions and lack of self-control of others. Additionally, although Vidala seems to embody Gilead's totalitarian and fearsome tendencies, Aunt Estée's kindness suggests that even in such a wicked religious system, kind-hearted individuals may exist and even help uphold the system.

Agnes and her friends belong to the special class of girls from wealthy families, "pre-chosen" to some day marry Commanders or Sons of Jacob. Although Agnes does not think she is pretty, she feels especially "chosen" since her mother Tabitha often tells her a story about finding her in a castle, choosing her from a number of girls, and stealing her away through the forest at night, hiding from the witches. Agnes has a vague memory of being carried through the forest, so she wonders if the story might indeed be true. In any case, she loves Tabitha, and Tabitha loves her.

Agnes's proximity to the most powerful individuals in Gilead allows the narrative to focus entirely on Gilead's upper leadership and examine the power structures at play within such a tyrannical theocracy. If Agnes had been born a low-class individual, a common person, the framing of her relationship to certain powerful individuals would be even less equitable than it is now.

CHAPTER 3

Agnes is six or seven years old. She lives with her mother, Tabitha, and her father, Commander Kyle, though she rarely interacts with her father. She has a dollhouse that roughly mirrors their house, with a wife for the mother, a Commander for the father, and a "big kitchen for the Marthas." The father doll sits in his study, which has books with blank pages that Tabitha insists are only decorations, like flower vases. Agnes is not allowed in Commander Kyle's study, where he does his important work that only men's brains are capable of doing, according to Aunt Estée and Aunt Vidala.

Tabitha's insistence that books are only stacks of black pages that sit as decorations suggests that Agnes, as a girl, is so far removed from any sort of literature that she has never seen an actual book in person. The Aunts' teaching that only male brains are capable of certain important work suggests that those in power believe men and women's brains are biologically distinct, which could explain Gilead's strict gender roles.

The dollhouse also contains a Handmaid doll and a swing set, though girls would never dare swing on the swings lest the wind lift their long skirts and allow someone to see beneath them. The Handmaid wears the red dress and white hat to cover her face, and her stomach is swollen and pregnant. Tabitha says their dollhouse does not need a Handmaid, since they already have Agnes, and Agnes is not sorry to take the Handmaid away, since the real ones make her anxious. She sees them sometimes, walking in pairs, eyes downcast but still watching. She tries not to stare, since it is rude to stare at lesser people and social outcasts, but she can't help wondering whether they were once like herself, but "allowed some alluring part of themselves to show."

Although the novel's preceding book, The Handmaid's Tale, focused exclusively on the Handmaids' plight in Gilead, Tabitha removing the Handmaid doll from view suggests that Handmaids will play a much smaller role in this story. It also suggests that Tabitha feels a sense of shame and aversion toward Handmaids, perhaps implying that her own husband may have had one in the past.

In the evenings, Tabitha prays with Agnes that angels will stand guard around her bed and protect her soul. This unnerves Agnes, though, especially the thought of Angels with their uniforms and guns watching her as she slept, since some part of her body might stick out from under the covers and entice them to do terrible things. Agnes wonders about her soul as well, which seems to always be under threat, according to Aunt Vidala.

Gilead naming its soldier Angels highlights the religious hypocrisy inherent to Gilead's mixture of religion and militaristic authority. Whereas biblical angels are typically viewed as a comforting presence, here they take on a violent, threatening role. Agnes's fear that the Angels will take advantage of her if she is not careful and guarded enough makes the Angels seem rather like predatory demons.

CHAPTER 4

Agnes is eight or nine years old. She spends less time with Tabitha, because Tabitha is always in her room "resting" now. Agnes sits in the kitchen with their three Marthas—her family has three because her father is very important—Rosa, Vera, and Zilla. Zilla is the kindest. The Marthas let Agnes help a little when they make bread, but when Agnes asks to make it from scratch they insist that this is not fitting work for a special girl like her to be doing. Once her parents pick a husband for her, she'll have her own Marthas to make bread for her.

The Marthas' refusal to let Agnes do work presumed lower than her station suggests that even for women in Agnes's privileged position, as the upper-class daughter of one of Gilead's elite, her choice in life are severely limited, not only be societal expectations that she will act in narrow accordance with her gender, but also in narrow accordance with her social class.

Agnes insists that she doesn't want a husband, since they seem disgusting, but Zilla reassures her that they're not all bad, and her parents will make sure to find a wealthy man for her. Making bread does not suit Agnes's social class and her future Marthas would look down on her for it. Zilla adds that people cannot do everything that they want to do, even if they are a special girl, and sometimes one must do things that they abhor. Agnes cries and runs to Tabitha's room, crawling into the bed with her. As Tabitha tries to comfort her, Agnes asked if she came from Tabitha's stomach—a friend at school recently told her that babies come from stomachs. Tabitha does not answer, which scares Agnes.

Once again, the Marthas' insistence that baking is too low an occupation for Agnes's social class highlights her lack of choice in all aspects of her life. Zilla's admonition that sometimes people have to do things they don't want to suggests that if Agnes conforms Gilead's mold for women, she will play a largely passive role in her own life, moving through predetermined events that she did not choose for herself. Both as a young girl and later as a grown woman, personal agency is not something afforded to women in Gilead.

CHAPTER 5

Tabitha is dying, but nobody tells Agnes. She finds out this information from Shunammite, a girl at school who claims to be her best friend. Becka also attends their school, though the other girls look down on her since her father is not a Commander, but only a highly regarded dentist. Aunt Vidala discourages close relationships, however, arguing that such relationships lead to whispering, planning, and rebellion. And while rebellious men turn into traitors, rebellious women turn into adulteresses, which is far worse and merits execution. Aunt Estée claims that this fearmongering is unnecessary.

Agnes's peers' prejudice towards Becka for not being a Commander's daughter suggests that children absorb their parents' classism even at a young age. Aunt Vidala, who gleefully embodies many of the worst aspects of Gilead, treats adultery as a far graver crime than treason, which suggests that Gilead's chief concern is not national security, but repressing women and keeping them submissive, fearful, and obedient.

Shunammite's family only has one Martha, as opposed to Agnes's three. Even so, Shunammite is belligerent and headstrong, and sometimes bullies other girls, but Agnes does not have the wherewithal to stand up to her. When Shunammite tells Agnes that Tabitha is dying during lunch, Agnes does not believe her, and claims she only has a condition. Shunammite insists that one of the Marthas told her it was so.

Although Agnes comes from a privileged family, she is not the strongest, bravest, or prettiest of her peers. This characterizes Agnes as a largely average girl, which strongly contrasts with Lydia, whose is immensely powerful and cunning, and allows the narrative to explore events from both angles.

When Agnes gets home from school, she angrily confronts her Marthas and demands to know which one of them lied to Shunammite. Zilla apologizes and tells Agnes that they'd all assumed she knew that Tabitha was dying already, that her parents would've told her, though Commander Kyle is almost never home now. Tabitha dies two days later, and Agnes feels as if a piece of her has been ripped away. She hopes that angels will take Tabitha's soul to heaven, like in their prayers, but some part of her doubts this.

Even within Agnes's immediate family, withholding information seems to be the prevailing instinct, reiterating the manner in which Agnes, as a female, is kept ignorant and in the dark as much as possible. Her father's absence even during her mother's death suggests that Kyle did not care for his wife and has no interest in his daughter's emotional well-being.

CHAPTER 6: THE ARDUA HALL HOLOGRAPH

Aunt Lydia prepares herself for bed, looking at herself in the mirror as she unpins her hair. She was "handsome" once, but now she is old and withering. Her hair is shorter and thinner. She is dying, quicker than many realize but not quickly enough for some. She wonders how she will meet her end, whether hidden away through old age, toppled with the regime, torn apart by a mob, head impaled on a pike, or tried and shot by firing squad. She has certainly enraged enough people for any of those options. And she's made her list of who to bring down with her when she goes.

Contrasting with Agnes's weak will and general passivity, Lydia is characterized as the most subversively powerful character in the story, the effective puppet-master in Gilead's downfall. The scope of Lydia's power hinted at here, and later described in detail, suggests that even in a patriarchal theocracy that seeks to subdue women, some women may learn to hold and exert tremendous power, not because it was given to them, but because they earned it.

Lydia suspects that the reader already knows who she is, that her fearsome reputation has preceded her. She is a "legend," a looming and threatening figure larger than life, a monster used to scare children. Now, lost in her own power—since, in Gilead, one either becomes powerful or dies—Lydia only wonders how to return to her "normal size" after growing so inhumanly large.

In The Handmaid's Tale, Lydia occupied the role of an archetypal villain with no redeeming qualities. Her narration and characterization in this story offer Lydia's character redemption, developing her from a one-dimensional monster to a complex and dynamic character, a human of "normal size" rather than an evil archetype.

It is Easter in the rest of the world, and though Gilead does not celebrate it, Lydia still allows the Aunts to dye the eggs they will eat for supper. She leads the seasonal prayer, praying for Baby Nicole who was stolen from Gilead and is lost in Canada, and who has become an icon for Gilead's "faithful." They end with the incantation "*Per Ardua Cum Estrus*." Lydia is pleased with herself at having developed the Latin phrase, which means nothing but inspires obedient repetition of it. The hymns that three young Supplicants now sing were also written by Lydia, not to be beautiful or inspirational, but to reinforce obedience. Ardua Hall is not forgiving of disobedience. As the singing ends, Lydia sees Aunt Elizabeth take one more egg than she is allotted, and Vidala watching furtively.

The fact that Gilead does not celebrate Easter suggests they do not practice traditional Christianity but have developed their own religious variation. As recognized by the narration, Baby Nicole works as an icon, a symbol for both Gilead (representing the outside world's immoral interference in Gilead's affairs) and those who oppose Gilead (representing the possibility for escape and freedom for Gilead's women). However, in treating Baby Nicole as an iconic symbol, both sides effectively dehumanize Nicole by failing to remember she is a human being with her own personality, hopes, and desires.

After dinner, Lydia makes her way to the library, through the genealogical archives—kept very carefully so as to avoid incest when marriages are arranged—and past the Bibles in their locked boxes, to her inner sanctum. Here, amidst the banned literature, she has a trove of dangerous information on people throughout Gilead. "Knowledge is power." In a Catholic text—deemed heretical and unlikely to be touched by anyone else—she keeps a manuscript that would certainly earn her immediate execution if discovered, though she is not ready to die yet. Lydia reflects that, among other things, this writing is an attempt to justify her own life and the atrocities in which she's participated. Once, before the regime began, she'd been a judge, voted and paid taxes, and wrongly assumed that this would all lead to a virtuous life.

Although Lydia is one of the architects of Gilead's social structure and one of the most powerful figures within its government, her secret hoarding of dangerous information demonstrates that she is laying her own plans. Lydia explicitly recognizes that "knowledge is power," and her gathering of useful material demonstrates that even as a woman in a repressive society, the right information can grant a massive amount of power. Lydia's brief remembrance of her past life again suggests that, despite the mythic status she has achieved, she is still only a human being, making her way through life like anyone else.

CHAPTER 7: TRANSCRIPT OF WITNESS TESTIMONY 369B

Daisy recounts that she'll begin shortly before Neil and Melanie died, on what was supposedly her 16th birthday. Daisy doesn't want a party, but Melanie bought cake and ice cream, nonetheless. This is the day that Daisy finds out her life is a "forgery."

It's important to note that the narratives of Agnes, Lydia, and Daisy do not correspond chronologically with one another. Although Agnes is still a child in her last narrative, by this point in Daisy's life, Agnes is already an adult.

Neil and Melanie, Daisy's parents, run a secondhand clothing store called The Clothes Hound on Queen West in Toronto, filled to bursting with old fabrics and dingy clothes. Street people often come into sell their clothes as well. Melanie handles the sales floor and sorting donations, while Neil handles the business end, keeping books from a cluttered office upstairs above the store. Among old adding machines and paperwork is a shelf full of antique cameras that Daisy is not allowed to touch, and a safe with an odd metal and glass device in it. Neil, Melanie, and Daisy live in a nondescript little house in the suburbs a long distance away, which Daisy realizes in retrospect was by design.

Neil and Melanie's operation of a secondhand clothing store frequented by street people establish them as humble and lower-class, which sharply contrasts with both Aunt Lydia and Agnes's lives among Gilead's elite. It additionally suggests that they are naturally philanthropic people, more interested in helping and improving the lives of others rather than increasing their own status or wealth. Their pointedly nondescript life suggests that they are hiding something as well.

CHAPTER 8

Daisy spends most weekends at The Clothes Hound since Melanie never lets her be home alone, though never offers a good reason why. Daisy spends her days there sorting clothing at a back table and watching customers come and go. Street people often come in to use the restroom, since they know Melanie will let them in as long as she knows them. One of these people is a man named George, whom Daisy finds unsettling, but Melanie seems to like. Ada, an older, "angular" woman who wears black leather biker gear and no makeup, also comes in often. She never buys anything, but Melanie always gives her a box of clothing which she takes "for charity." Daisy notices that Ada never drives the same car twice; they're always different.

Once again, Melanie's refusal to let Daisy be home alone and Ada and George's constant and mysterious presence suggests that something is occurring below the surface, even if Daisy does not truly suspect it yet. The secrecy surrounding Daisy's life with Neil and Melanie creates and interesting parallel with the secrecy covering everything in Gilead, suggesting that as evil as Gilead and its enforced ignorance may seem, such things often occur in the "normal" outside world as well, whether or not they happen for good reason.

Pearl Girls often come to the store as well. As Gilead's missionaries, the young women in long silvery dresses try to entice homeless or vulnerable people to join their country. Many people hate them, but Melanie is always kind and accepts their brochures. They always carry brochures about Baby Nicole too, demanding her return to Gilead. But Baby Nicole is as much an icon of Canada's anti-Gilead protests as she is an icon for Gilead. Daisy wrote a paper in middle school arguing that Canada ought to just give Nicole back and stop treating her like "a football" so everyone could just settle down. This enraged her teacher, which was Daisy's intent.

Daisy's feeling that Baby Nicole is handled like a football again suggests that, by treating Nicole as an icon and a symbol rather than a human being, both Gilead and the anti-Gilead movement dehumanize her. This is reiterated by the fact that, 15 years after Baby Nicole is smuggled out of Gilead, both parties still call her Baby Nicole rather than simply Nicole, who is a mere human being and would now be a teenager.

Melanie always promises the Pearl Girls that she will keep a little stack of brochures in the store and gives the old ones back to them each time they visit. Daisy asks Melanie why she does this rather than tell them that they're evil, since their family are atheists, anyway, and anyone (especially women) who could participate in such a regime must be monsters. After Melanie gives a non-answer, Daisy decides she'll tell them herself, but Melanie sharply warns her to never go near them.

Daisy's opinion that any woman who participates in Gilead is a monster is a direct condemnation of characters such as Lydia or Agnes, and embodies the over-simplified view that the story tries to combat, suggesting instead that the individuals within an evil regime are not always themselves evil by necessity, but possibly swept up in greater events beyond their control.

CHAPTER 9

Melanie and Neil never truly feel like Daisy's parents; they always seem a little too careful and distant, as if she was something that they're nervous of breaking or ruining. Other kids at school have hundreds of photos of their childhood, even of their own birth, but Daisy has none.

The fact that Canadian culture is accepting of children seeing photos of their own birth suggests that they are far more permissive of nudity and exposed female bodies than Gilead, and thus less repressive.

Daisy's school is going to bus its students into the city for the following day so they can participate in the city's anti-Gilead protest march, which will be Daisy's first. She has spent all week making signs for it. However, Neil and Melanie firmly forbid her from going, saying that there will be too much press there and it will be dangerous. Daisy is furious, especially since they've always raised her to stand up for her convictions, and she shuts herself in her room. On the day of the march, Daisy goes to school and then sneaks onto the bus heading toward the march. None of her teachers suspect that she shouldn't be there.

Again, although Daisy lives in Canada, a country of relative freedom for women, Daisy's parent's refusal to let her go to the protest echoes the lack of choice that Agnes has in every aspect of her life, suggesting that such lack of choice also occurs in the outside world. However, Neil and Melanie's control over Daisy comes from a noble desire to protect her, which thus complicates the concept of choice, since good intentions may restrict choice as well.

CHAPTER 10

At first the march is "thrilling." There are protest leaders speaking, Gilead refugees (harbored by an organization called SanctuCare) telling their stories, and lots of Baby Nicole posters everywhere. Pearl Girls are there as well, counter-protesting with their own signs and glassy smiles. Anti-Gilead protesters start throwing eggs at them, people start breaking shop windows, and a full riot erupts. Daisy is terrified and feels like she's "drowning" in the sea of people. Ada appears behind her, grabs her by the collar, and drags her through the crowd.

Although Gilead is known for its violent repression of its citizens, it is the anti-Gilead protesters who commit the first act of violence toward the Pearl Girls and thus toward women, suggesting that such foul behavior is not relegated only to repressive regimes, but may be committed by everyday citizens as well, even as they try to confront totalitarian violence.

That evening, Daisy sees herself on the news, holding a sign and chanting with the crowd. She'd expected her parents to be angry, but instead they seem "anxious." They talk about needing to relocate immediately and calling Ada, but Neil worries that they have no "fallback" in place yet. Daisy does not understand what is happening.

Once again, Neil and Melanie keep Daisy ignorant of the events surrounding her, which echoes the secretive behavior of Gilead and suggests that such seemingly disdainful behavior may be committed even by well-meaning people.

CHAPTER 11

Three days later, someone breaks into The Clothes Hound. They don't take any money but do steal one of Neil's old cameras, which he frets about nervously. That evening, Daisy finds Neil and Melanie watching the news, which they never do. The report is about a Pearl Girl named Aunt Adrianna who was found in a hotel. Her death appears to have been a suicide. Neil and Melanie commiserate for the dead girl, which Daisy can't understand, even though Aunt Adrianna was often at their store with another girl named Aunt Sally.

Once again, Daisy demonstrates the common belief that anyone who participates or supports a tyrannical regime must themselves be evil or monstrous. Neil and Melanie's sadness for Aunt Adrianna's death suggests they understand that such a death is always a tragedy, and that just because she worked for Gilead does not necessarily mean that she herself was a wicked person.

The morning of her birthday, Daisy comes down from her bedroom to find empty plates and crumbs on the table—remnants from one of her parents' activist meetings the night before. Melanie wishes her a happy birthday. At school, a few friends wish her happy birthday as well, and the day passes slowly. Daisy feels disappointed that this day feels like any other and that she's still never been on a date. At the end of the day, instead of Melanie arriving to pick her up, Ada is there instead and tells her to get in the car with her; Neil and Melanie were murdered by a car bomb at The Clothes Hound. Daisy is in shock and does not know how to react or process the news.

Neil and Melanie's mysterious murder—by a bombing, no less—confirms that there was much that they concealed from Daisy about their lives, which would thus suggest that people are often far more complex and dynamic than them may seem on the surface, including people from Gilead or any such oppressive regime. Although Daisy does not really know Ada, in the wake of Daisy's parents' death, Ada presents herself as a sort of substitute parent figure.

CHAPTER 12: THE ARDUA HALL HOLOGRAPH

Lydia wonders who the reader of her manuscript will be, whether a foreign historian or a horrified Aunt who will swiftly report it to the Eyes or burn it immediately to preserve Lydia's holy memory. Thus far Lydia has survived several purges, since those in power do not like to be challenged and often hang potential threats to their rule from the Wall. However, Lydia knows too much—she is an invaluable asset for managing the woman's half of Gilead. She keeps secrets for every man of power in the government on the condition that her own life is preserved. Even so, she, like everyone in Gilead, is never safe, and she hopes for "just a little more time" to achieve her aims.

The Wall operates as a symbol of Gilead's authoritarian power and its ability to control its citizens through physical or psychological means. The Wall physically entraps citizens, keeping them from easily fleeing to freedom, while also acting as a permanent display of the executed traitors, criminals, and adulterers who defy Gilead's strictures. The Wall thus becomes a permanent psychological fixture in Gilead's citizens' minds, as much as it is a physical fixture.

Lydia is invited to meet Commander Judd in the Eyes' headquarters, established in what was once a grand library that still possesses many contraband books. Although this meeting is not unprecedented, the Eyes' domain is still a dangerous place and Commander Judd, as their head, is one of the most powerful men in Gilead. When Lydia arrives in Judd's office, they exchange pleasantries. Lydia asks after his wife's health. Judd has a predilection for very young girls, like "King David and assorted Central American drug lords." His wives tend to mysteriously die once they age out of his tastes, at which point he'll be "in the market for another child bride." This is an open secret between himself and Lydia.

Commander Judd and Lydia's relationship is one of the most interesting in the entire story. Both of them model their own particular use of power as allowed in a male-dominated society. Judd exercises his power through his militaristic might and high position as a man, while Lydia exercises hers through her subversive gathering and utilizing of incriminating information, such as Judd's multiple murders of past wives. Although the story is not particularly condemning of Christianity at large, the author does point out several objectionable aspects of the Bible, such as King David's predilection for very young women.

Judd explains that his operatives in Canada have identified and eliminated two members of the Mayday resistance movement—which runs the Underground Femaleroad—with the help of Lydia's Pearl Girls. The Pearl Girls, like many other things, were established by Lydia, since she reasoned that if other religions have missionaries who take part in espionage, then so should theirs. Lydia directly oversees them and the printing of the brochures they carry in Ardua Hall. They gather intelligence, some of which Lydia passes along to Judd, though not all. Judd reveals that they've learned the Mayday operatives have a source in Gilead leaking information to them, and Lydia feigns shock and assures Judd she will hunt for this traitor. Judd thanks her and expresses his admiration for her abilities.

The Underground Femaleroad is an obvious parallel to the actual Underground Railroad, which smuggled escaped African American slaves to freedom in the 18th and 19th century. Lydia's insidious use of missionaries also parallels the common use of European Christian missionaries to penetrate foreign countries that England, Spain, Portugal, and France (among others) intended to colonize. Gilead's use of such tactics sharply criticizes such abuses of Christianity and organized religion throughout history, which are unfortunately widespread.

Lydia thinks that her life could have been different had she fled the country earlier like many women did, but she stayed behind with her country, which she once loved. Lydia's journey was "littered with corpses" though she herself managed to survive.

Lydia is a woman who survives at any cost, even when it causes the deaths of others. While she is certainly not a traditional hero, neither is she the archetypal villain.

Lydia recalls the past: she was arrested right after the Sons of Jacob "liquidated Congress" in a sweeping terrorist attack. A state of emergency was declared; American citizens were told to just carry on as usual. Although the courts were closed, Lydia and some of her female colleagues were there to catch up on work and enjoy each other's company. Katie, recently pregnant via sperm donor, burst into Lydia's office and told her they needed to get out of the country right away. Her bank account and all assets had been seized—something bad was happening. Anita arrived as well, and said that her assets were frozen, too, and that the constitution had just been entirely abolished. Whoever planned this has been preparing it for years.

By setting her story in the near future, in a version of America that seems entirely familiar until it is usurped, Atwood places her story in the realm of speculative fiction. Rather than envision scenarios that seem utterly implausible or hundreds of years away, Atwood instead imagines (and warns) what might happen in the next few decades if certain events in past history were to repeat themselves and certain fringe elements of society, such as religious fanatics, were to gain power and become the mainstream element of society.

A group of men toting guns kicked the front door in. One woman screamed. They immediately began sorting the women between fertile, young and attractive enough that a man might still marry, and older and professional. Lydia and Anita were both in the older and professional category, so they were handcuffed, loaded into a black van, and transported to a stadium where they were roughly deposited. Lydia saw that it had been converted into a prison.

The fact that the Sons of Jacob sort out the professional women immediately suggests that they understand how powerful an educated woman can be, and how much more difficult such women will be to control. It is significant that the Sons of Jacob's first act is to sort and imprison women, suggesting that their desire to control and subjugate women is at least as primary than any religious motivation.

CHAPTER 13: TRANSCRIPT OF WITNESS TESTIMONY 369A

Agnes admits that it is still difficult and painful to recount Tabitha's death. After she died, they hold a funeral, for which Agnes received a black dress to wear. Afterward, the distinguished attendees return to Commander Kyle's home for a reception. Among these guests is a widow named Paula, who has a somewhat infamous reputation since her former husband, Commander Saunders, was murdered by their Handmaid, stabbed in the throat with a kitchen skewer. The Handmaid reportedly fled, but was caught, killed, and hung on the Wall for all to see. Paula claimed that the Handmaid spontaneously went insane and killed her husband in the night, but rumor persists that she killed Saunders in the midst of a forbidden tryst. Paula condescendingly pats Agnes on the head at the reception, and Agnes hates her immediately.

Paula is immediately established as a character associated with crime, death, and carnage. The conflicting reports of the circumstances of her husband's death suggest that information is being intentionally concealed. Agnes's loss of her mother marks the beginnings of her loss of innocence, as well, where her life will go from relatively happy to dark, foreboding, and miserable. The Handmaid hung on the Wall again symbolically portrays the ruthless power that Gilead exerts over its subjects, especially those as lowly as Handmaids.

Several months later, Kyle marries Paula and gives her Tabitha's wedding ring, even though it should have gone to Agnes. Paula and Kyle largely ignore Agnes, and Agnes sulks in misery.

Agnes's new misery and discontent with her life primes her to eventually take subversive actions against the injustices of Gilead.

CHAPTER 14

Not long after her Kyle and Paula's wedding, Agnes hears a disturbing story at school. In their classroom hangs portraits of the Founders: Aunts Lydia, Helena, Elizabeth, and Vidala. Lydia's portrait is largest and seems fearsome. Vidala announces she will tell the girls one of God's most important messages to women from the Bible: the story of the Concubine—like a Handmaid—cut into 12 pieces. In the story, a man's concubine runs away to her father's home, which is very disobedient, and he travels to retrieve her, graciously accepting her back with no punishment. However, as they are traveling home, sleeping in a strange town, a group of strange men want to have sex with the traveling man and threaten him. The traveler gives them the concubine instead, and they rape her until she dies.

Lydia's largest portrait again suggests that she is the most powerful even among the Founding Aunts, holding a mythic status in many people's minds. Vidala uses a real story from the Bible to terrify young girls and repress them through fear. Although this is later revealed to be a misinterpretation of the story's message, the story is no less horrific for it. By highlighting the gruesome nature of various stories in the Bible, the narrative does not directly condemn Christianity, but does point out that much of its holy book's contents seems disturbing and highly questionable, especially when used to intimidate or manipulate people.

Vidala comments that the concubine deserved it for being so troublesome, and that it's "God's way of telling us to be content with our lot and not rebel against it." Later, Agnes will learn that in the rest of the story the man cuts the concubine's body into 12 pieces and sends it to all the tribes of Israel, and there is a lot of war and kidnapping of women as a result. However, Becka is crying so hard that they do not finish the story. Aunt Vidala is annoyed at the outburst, so Aunt Estée takes her place and tries to console the class by saying that the concubine made a "brave and noble" sacrifice to save her owner, just like a soldier might sacrifice himself for his comrades in war. Becka murmurs to herself that she will never ever get married.

Although Aunt Estée is obviously kinder and gentler than Aunt Vidala, her interpretation of the moral of the story is no less disturbing. Both Vidala's claim that the assaulted and murdered women deserved such a fate, and Estée's claim that she bravely sacrificed herself for the sake of a man, serve to depict women as inherently less innocent and less valuable for men. Based on this, it's clear that Gilead views women as responsible even for terrible crimes that men themselves commit. This demonstrates the manner in which fear and shame may be used to teach young women to fear their own bodies and think very little of their value.

CHAPTER 15

A few months later, Commander Kyle gets a Handmaid, whose name becomes Ofkyle, to bear him a child. Shunammite insists, "They're all sluts anyway, they don't need real names." The presence of the Handmaid implies both that Paula, like most women, is infertile, and that she does not recognize Agnes as her own daughter.

Ofkyle's name—literally "of Kyle"—signifies that Commander Kyle has total ownership of her, suggesting that Ofkyle has no personal agency or right to choose as a Handmaid. Shunammite's frank disdain for Ofkyle demonstrates that such social prejudice can even infect the minds of children.

Agnes is nearly "womanly age, as Gilead counted." Her face is elongating and becoming prettier, her breasts are beginning to grow, and she is starting notice body hair. She is "no longer a precious flower but a much more dangerous creature." Soon, she knows, she'll begin to menstruate. Agnes thinks it strange that such blood is considered "polluting" and yet God seems to really like blood in the Bible, especially "having it spilled on altars." Agnes regards her growing woman's body as "one big booby trap" and finds herself wishing she didn't have it.

Agnes's fear of her growing womanly body demonstrates the painful consequence of using fear and shame to repress a young woman's sexuality and personal agency. Agnes has been taught for so long to see her body as a dangerous and alluring device that she almost feels as if it is her enemy; she would rather disassociate from it and be rid of it, since then she'd be safe.

Since Paula rejected Agnes as her own child, her status falls both in her father's eyes and the eyes of her peers at school. She is largely ignored, though Shunammite still claims to be her friend. However, one day Shunammite gloatingly tells Agnes that she's discovered a new secret: Tabitha was not Agnes's real mother. According to Shunammite, Agnes's real mother was a Handmaid, a "slut" who'd tried to take her across the border through the woods into Canada, but the Angels and the Eyes caught up to her and stole Agnes back.

Once again, Agnes's fall in social standing amongst her peers reflects the manner in which such social prejudice, enforced by adults, seeps into the learned behavior of children as well. Already feeling at odds with society, the revelation that Agnes's mother was a Handmaid and a fugitive further sets Agnes at odds against Gilead's regime, positioning her to rebel against it in the future.

Agnes doesn't want to believe the story, but it fits too closely with her own vague memories of being carried through the dark forest and she realizes Shunammite must be telling the truth. This means that Commander Kyle is not even her real father; she belongs to nobody. And if Shunammite knows, then everyone knows—her classmates and the Aunts.

Agnes's feeling of belonging to no one further reduces her loyalty to the regime and establishes her as a character who could easily act against it, since she would not be betraying a real family or loving community.

CHAPTER 16

Agnes feels that she's in a stupor for the rest of the day. In the afternoon, she pricks her finger while they are embroidering handkerchiefs and bleeds on her white cloth. Aunt Estée helps her bandage her finger and clean the blood out of the cloth, since that was one of the things women are good at, with their "soft" brains which are not like men's "hard and focused" brains. Agnes imagines that her brain must be little more than "warmed-up mud."

Agnes's low view of her own mind and its capabilities demonstrates the manner in which such strictly enforced gender roles may lead individuals to make assumptions about themselves that are pernicious but entirely untrue. Agnes's mind is no less capable than any other mind, and yet she automatically assumes that she is weak and stupid.

After school, Agnes questions Zilla about her mother, and Zilla is angry that Agnes's friend told her but confirms that she was born by a Handmaid. However, Zilla remarks that if one's mother is the person who loves them most, then Tabitha is still her rightful mother. Agnes asks what happened to her birthmother, if she escaped or was caught and killed. Zilla answers that no one knows, though even if they did catch her, she's too valuable as a fertile woman to be killed. They would send her instead to the Leah and Rachel Center to be reconditioned by the Aunts, who are very good at "changing hearts and minds." No one knows what happens in that place, but everyone knows that "sluts" become Handmaids there.

Although the story places great emphasis on biological motherhood throughout both Agnes and Daisy's narrative, Zilla's comment suggests that love may be as important an element in motherhood as biological relationship. In this view, both Tabitha and Melanie are real and valuable mothers, even if they themselves did not give birth. Zilla's comment about the Leah and Rachel Center "changing hearts and minds" implies, in light of Gilead's brutality, that women are tortured into becoming submissive Handmaids, which is particularly grim.

From that moment, Agnes is fascinated by Ofkyle, her father's Handmaid. Although Agnes is not allowed to speak or interact with Ofkyle, Agnes finds herself secretly staring at her and wondering what her past life was like as a "slut," what that even means, and if she'd exposed her body or worn men's clothing. Looking at how subdued Ofkyle is now, she imagines that "she must have had a lot more energy" back then. She wonders if Ofkyle could be her birthmother and imagines how wonderful it would be for them to be reunited. She even sneaks into Ofkyle's room to look for clues to her real identity but finds nothing. Meanwhile, her hatred for Paula grows, especially as her stepmother quietly purges every relic of Tabitha's life from their house.

Although Agnes imagines Ofkyle's past life as something wild and scandalous, what she describes is itself standard acceptable behavior in the modern world, demonstrating how such a confined and repressed existence can distort one's viewpoint. Agnes's feeling that Ofkyle must have been more energetic back then suggests that women are allowed to be far freer, more productive, and more themselves when they are not burdened by such weighty social expectations of modesty, chastity, and submissiveness.

CHAPTER 17

Ofkyle becomes pregnant and the household goes from vaguely tolerating her to doting on her. Paula glows with joy. Although their family will not make any announcement until three months in, because of how many babies are stillborn, all of Agnes's classmates quickly find out and her status among them is immediately restored. As for Ofkyle, she seems less joyful than relieved, and Agnes herself feels childishly bitter that the new baby has drawn all attention away from herself—even the Marthas' attention.

Both Agnes and Ofkyle's rise in standing due to a pregnancy suggests that in Gilead, a woman's primary value (or lack thereof) is relegated to her ability to produce children, regardless of what other virtues or strengths she may have. Ofkyle is never valued for her intelligence, insights, or virtues, but reduced only to her status as a child-bearing vessel, and thus dehumanized.

Around this time a "shameful" thing happens to Agnes. Agnes goes to the dentist, Dr. Grove (Becka's father), for her yearly check-up. Although a Martha would normally go with her, Paula insists they are all too busy and sends Agnes alone, which makes her feel grown up. Dr. Grove performs the dental check-up and takes his gloves off to wash his hands. However, the man remarks that she is growing up and then proceeds to sexually abuse her. Agnes is horrified and feels that this confirms what she'd always been taught about men and their "fiery urges," imagining that she must somehow be the cause of it. When Dr. Grove is finished, he cleans himself off, tells Agnes that he did not hurt her, and sends her out.

Agnes's feeling that she somehow brought Dr. Grove's sexual abuse on herself, merely by sitting in a dentist's chair, again demonstrates the detrimental effects of such repressive teaching about purity and sexuality. Agnes is unable to recognize that Dr. Grove committed a monstrous, criminal, unjustifiable act of his own volition. Rather, in her fear of her own sexuality, Agnes interprets the event as somehow being her own fault, thus partially absolving Dr. Grove of his crime in her own mind.

Agnes wonders if this will happen every year when she goes to the dentist but thinks it unavoidable. Even though the Aunts say that girls should report any man who touches them, Agnes knows it would be foolish to report it—she's seen girls whipped for reporting such things and the public humiliation would devastate Becka. Zilla meets Agnes when she gets home and tries to comfort Agnes, saying she should have gone with her. Agnes suspects that Zilla knows exactly what happened, and suspects that Paula intended it to happen. Agnes hates her stepmother even more from then on and feels vindicated in her hatred.

The powerlessness that Agnes feels to report the incident or to bring any sort of punishment or accountability down on Dr. Grove suggests that such heavily propagated ideas of gender and power—that men are more value, important, intelligent by design—inevitably lead to scenarios in which such wretched men as Dr. Grove have nearly free rein to hurt and exploit women. This condemns the teaching and propagation of any such gender roles or inequity.

CHAPTER 18

Months pass and Ofkyle's belly continues to swell. Agnes makes herself as invisible as possible but watches and listens. Commander Kyle seems unaffected by the pregnancy, but men are trained to be stoic. Other wives pay great attention to Paula now, and she often hosts dinner parties so that other women can come to dote on her and see her pregnant Handmaid. Watching through a crack in the door, Agnes sees that the women love Ofkyle's pregnant belly but care nothing for the person attached to it. They regard it as Paula's baby, not Ofkyle's. Ofkyle herself does her best to keep her face like stone, though Agnes occasionally sees flashes of pain and wonders if she cries at night. The whole situation makes Agnes angry; Ofkyle's baby will be taken from her just as she was taken from her own mother, even though Tabitha truly did love her.

Ofkyle is the only Handmaid seen throughout the entire story and functions to encapsulate the painful and dehumanizing position they occupy in society, which the first book centered on. Ofkyle is regarded by Paula and her friends only as a womb—her only value is in her ability to bear children, emphasized by the fact that they only show concern for her pregnant belly, not for Ofkyle herself. This narrow focus dehumanizes Ofkyle since it does not recognize her as a full human being with her own hopes and desires, and thus demonstrates the manner in which a narrow, gendered view of women that places all emphasis on motherhood can be similarly dehumanizing.

On the Birth Day, wives gather with Paula to wait and hear the news. Ofkyle is situated in the master bedroom so that the midwife Aunts and the Marthas can all be present to help, but unmarried girls like Agnes are forbidden from seeing a birth. She can hear Ofkyle's heavy breathing and grunting, though, and wonders what torture is being inflicted on her. Suddenly, one of the Aunts runs out into the hallway calling for a doctor because Ofkyle is bleeding. A doctor arrives in his black car and runs into the room to operate. The baby is born, but Ofkyle dies. The Marthas pity Ofkyle's death but insist that it was either her life or the baby's life on the line. Agnes goes to bed.

The prohibition against young women witnessing a birth acts as yet another measure of control, since all women are expected to be mothers and yet they are not allowed to see what motherhood truly entails. This not only limits the knowledge of girls like Agnes, but also their power to choose, since they cannot witness the painful process of childbirth before experiencing it themselves. By setting up situations that suggest such concealment of knowledge or hiding of reality is wrong, the novel argues that honesty is the most moral path.

Later, Agnes sneaks up to Ofkyle's room where they have left the body and pulls back the sheet to look at her face. Her eyes are open, staring, and her skin is completely white. Agnes kisses her forehead and remarks that she'll never forget her. Years later, Agnes looks her up in the genealogical archives and finds that her real name was Crystal, and so this is how Agnes remembers her. The family holds a small funeral service for Ofkyle, and Aunt Lydia is present to make a speech. She remarks that Ofkyle made the ultimate sacrifice and demonstrated her nobility, though her voice shakes when she says this. Agnes thinks this is nonsense: the reality is that they cut Crystal's body open and killed her. Nobody asked Crystal if she'd wanted to sacrifice herself. There was never any choice.

Ofkyle's death and lack of choice in whether to sacrifice her own life to save the baby's bears an obvious parallel to debates around abortion in the modern world. In Gilead, abortion is illegal and the only life that truly matters is the child's, meaning that the mother has no choice over what happens to her body. This situation effectively parallels the situation a young mother would find herself in if she were caught in a dangerous pregnancy in a place where abortion is outlawed entirely, as some argue it should be. Agnes's horror and sense of the injustice at automatically valuing the life of the baby over the life of the mother obviously condemns taking away a woman's choice in such a matter.

CHAPTER 19

Agnes's classmates revile her once again, since their Handmaid's death was a sign of ill-fortune. Agnes reflects that their school has two religions: one taught by the Aunts about God and women's place in society, the other comprised of the superstitions and songs that the girls share amongst themselves. Some of those songs are made into games about hanging Handmaids on the Wall, and one of them lists off the many crimes a Handmaid could commit in order of severity, though kissing is regarded as more severe than murder, which Agnes finds strange. The older girls have their own superstitions, though theirs are serious rhymes to help them remember the unwritten rules of society and shame. Agnes's friends at school ignore her now, except for Becka, and at home everyone is preoccupied with the new baby. The universe feels unfair.

Once again, Agnes's classmates' derision towards her due to family events completely beyond her control demonstrate the manner in which prejudices are passed down from one generation to the next. This prejudice is reiterated by the songs and games the girls make up about hanging Handmaids and so forth. The fact that kissing, and thus adultery, is regarded as a more severe crime than murder demonstrates how woefully misaligned Gilead's morality has become. Adultery's place as the ultimate sin suggests that everything in Gilead revolves around controlling women and keeping them confined to the bounds of marriage.

CHAPTER 20: THE ARDUA HALL HOLOGRAPH

People emigrate out of Gilead in high numbers, which is an embarrassing look for "God's kingdom on earth." Especially in Vermont and Maine, where the locals despise Gilead's government, many individuals take payment from Mayday operatives to guide and smuggle women out through the woods and onto freedom. Lydia's family came from that area and, before Gilead was established, were a crime-ridden, lower class lot who resented her intelligence, especially since she was a girl. Her father often tried to "wallop those pretensions out of [her]." He was murdered before Gilead was instituted, but Lydia figures she would have arranged for his throat to be cut either way.

Gilead's emigration problem demonstrates that, although they claim to be the bastion of religious purity, its citizens are so unhappy that they flee in large numbers, suggesting that it is little more than an oppressive tyranny. However, Lydia recalls that she faced violent sexism and repression even before Gilead was formed. This suggests that although Gilead has systematized such gendered oppression, using religion as a catalyst, such misogyny is not unique either to Gilead or to religion.

Vidala, Elizabeth, and Helena present Lydia with a new plan they've written up to decrease the escaping of women into Canada involving more search dogs and better interrogation methods. Lydia assumes the interrogation bit was Vidala's doing; she secretly loves to torture. Lydia promises to pass the plan along to Commander Judd. Later in the day, the Aunts report back that a number of civilians have been arrested with suspected connections to Mayday in Canada, and they'll either by interrogated or traded as hostages. Lydia takes the opportunity to tell them about the two operatives recently killed in Canada and the existence of a traitor in their midst, leaking information. The Aunts are all deeply concerned by this and know that it could even be one of them.

Although the reader cannot know what Lydia's inner narrative was during the events of The Handmaid's Tale, the divide between herself (who secretly helps to smuggle people out of Gilead) and the other head Aunts (who are devising new ways to crack down on such escapees) suggests that this has been her position all throughout Gilead's existence. She has been quietly opposing the other Aunts and aiding their enemies while keeping up the pretense of avid cooperation and zealous patriotism.

Lydia goes back to writing about her arrest in the early days: After she and Anita were left at the stadium, their handcuffs were removed and they were "herded" into a section of marked off bleachers. There were hundreds of other women there, sorted by profession. Lydia and Anita were placed with the other judges and made to sit silently for hour as other women were deposited and sorted. As she sat, Lydia thought about how foolish she was to assume that the liberty, human rights, and democracy she'd enjoyed would always exist. Since it seemed the perpetrators were sorting out the professional women, she'd need to revert herself to her "underclass" upbringing and scheme to survive.

Lydia's reflection on how foolish it was to think that democracy and human rights would always exists seems a grave warning to the reader as well, who most likely makes those same assumptions. Just as Lydia's personal autonomy, and physical safety were suddenly stripped away from her through a historical event, Atwood warns that anyone's fundamental rights could be taken in that same way unless members of society take proactive measures to protect them.

By mid-afternoon, men passed out bottles of water, covered by other men pointing rifles at the women as if they were enemy combatants. The women were not allowed to even go to the bathroom, so human waste trickled down the bleachers after so many hours. In the late afternoon, 20 women were led out into the middle of the stadium and arranged in two lines, escorted by men with rifles. A black-uniformed man shouted into a microphone about God judging sinners, ending with "God will prevail!" The men said "Amen" and opened fire on the lines of women, executing them in front of their audience of the other women. Lydia didn't understand why they should make such a show if everyone was going to die. At sundown, the women were given sandwiches and allowed to go to the bathroom.

Although the Sons of Jacob dress their coup in religious imagery and conventions, their treatment of women as enemy combatants and execution as if they were prisoners of war suggests that a hatred of empowered women and desire to subjugate them are the true heart of the new regime. This is reiterated by the fact that highly educated women, who would be more difficult to control and subjugate, are the ones brought to the stadium for execution.

CHAPTER 21: TRANSCRIPT OF WITNESS TESTIMONY 369B

Daisy sits in Ada's car, trying to wrap her head around the thought of Neil and Melanie being dead. Ada steps out of the car, takes a wrench, and smashes her phone to pieces, claiming it's a cautionary measure. It reminds Daisy of something a drug dealer would do. Daisy wants to get out of the car and go to the police, and Ada gives her that choice, though warns her that she'd wind up in foster care at best, and advises her not to go home, above all else. The cops will be useless, Ada suggests. Daisy decides to stay and asks Ada if she's a cop, but Ada says that the less Daisy knows, the better.

Significantly, Ada recognizes the need to preserve Daisy's ability to choose for herself, even if that choice could potentially get Daisy killed. Ada's allowance for Daisy to decide for herself, even if there is only one reasonable choice, suggests that the ability to choose and exercise personal autonomy is critically important. This is especially true for women, since that choice and autonomy have been threatened so often throughout history.

They arrive at a Quaker church and enter. Daisy sees rows of cots inside with women lying in some of them, as well as armchairs and other women scattered about. Ada explains that this is SanctuCare, an organization for Gilead refugees. Ada leaves Daisy sitting at a table with some tea while she runs an errand and asks her not to move. Daisy watches as another group of Gilead women arrive and are received by the SanctuCare workers, who comfort them and advise them to "be strong." Being strong puts a lot of pressure on a person.

The fact that a Quaker church, a Christian denomination, is offering care to Gilead refugees and thus working in active opposition to Gilead's theocracy suggests that the novel is not criticizing Christianity as a whole or religion at large, but its integration into government and the abuse of religious teachings to uphold a tyrannical and oppressive system.

Ada returns with a bag of clothes, relieved that Daisy is still where she left her, and tells her to change into something she'd never wear otherwise, adding orange sunglasses and red lipstick. Daisy briefly wonders if she is being abducted but realizes she has nowhere else to go even if she is. Ada sees her changed appearance and remarks that their "secret" is safe for the time being, and Daisy wonders what that secret is.

For Daisy, still kept in the dark about the events surrounding her, rescue and abduction seem nearly the same thing and cause a lot of worry and stress in either case. This again suggests that concealing knowledge and keeping secrets help no one—honesty would be better for all individuals involved.

CHAPTER 22

Daisy and Ada leave the Quaker church, driving a different vehicle than the one they arrived in, and go to a large, old mansion called Carnarvon in a seedy part of Toronto. As they get out and walk inside, Daisy feels dizzy and uncertain, as if "the world was no longer solid and dependable." Ada steadies her by the arm and brings her inside, explaining that this place was once a rich person's summer home and has been converted into a boarding house. They go upstairs to an apartment with an electronic lock. Daisy is feeling even worse, so she lays down on the sofa with a blanket.

Daisy's dizziness and feeling that the world has become uncertain briefly foreshadows the revelation that both she and the reader are about to receive about her true identity. Ada's knowledge of seedy parts of Toronto and derelict boarding houses not only the deepen the mystery surrounding the past several hours, but further suggests that Ada is involved in underground activity of some sort.

When Daisy awakens, she finds the TV on. News of The Clothes Hound bombing is on the TV, but Daisy turns off the sound. Ada's made dinner for Daisy, but she's not hungry. Ada also bought chocolate cake and vanilla ice cream, Daisy's favorites, though she wonders how Ada could know that. Daisy is still sick, so she lays back down on the sofa and falls asleep to the sound of Ada moving around and making phone calls.

Ada's knowledge of Daisy's favorite foods implies that she has far more knowledge of Daisy than Daisy has of her, suggesting that Ada has been keeping tabs in Daisy in some way, for some reason. This once again implies that Neil and Melanie were oddly secretive for a reason, that they have been hiding something from Daisy.

CHAPTER 23

Daisy awakens in the morning in a bedroom. She wanders out into the hall and finds Ada sitting in the living room, drinking coffee with a leathery man in his 50s named Elijah, whom they'd seen at SanctuCare. While Daisy eats cereal, they announce that they have something they need to tell her. Elijah explains that the day before was not her real birthday and Neil and Melanie are not her real parents. Daisy doesn't believe him, though some part of her wonders if he's telling the truth and she feels like crying. Daisy asks if her real parents are alive and Elijah tells her that they are, or at least they were yesterday. He explains that she was born in Gilead, though of course she won't remember. Daisy is Baby Nicole.

The revelation that Daisy is actually Nicole changes the reader's perception of Baby Nicole as an iconic symbol. Prior to this, the reader was inclined to dehumanize Baby Nicole as an icon in the same way that Gilead and anti-Gilead protesters do, treating her not as a real person but only a symbolic object of resistance or proof of the outside world's immorality. However, the reader is now forced to regard Nicole as an actual human being, with her own personhood, opinions, and power to make decisions.

CHAPTER 24: THE ARDUA HALL HOLOGRAPH

Lydia receives another summons to Judd's office, even though they have a private phone line. Lydia suspects that Judd enjoys their face-to-face interactions and the play of power between them. When she arrives, Judd reveals that his current wife is ill and seems near her deathbed. Lydia offers whatever help she can give, and they both understand that Judd will soon kill his current wife and begin looking for a new "child bride." However, the reason he has called Lydia is to announce that Aunt Sally, the Pearl Girl who was partnered with Aunt Adrianna when she died in Canada, has returned to Gilead.

The horrific actions of Gilead's powerful men such as Judd and Dr. Grove demonstrate that Gilead is not the bastion of moral purity that it claims to be, but a society that allows men to abuse their power to hurt and exploit women under the cover of religious piety. Such a society is arguably not the embodiment of religious purity, but an example of the abuse of religion to gain and maintain power over others.

Later, Aunt Lydia meets with Aunt Sally, who has just arrived from Canada. Sally tearfully recounts that she killed Adrianna in self-defense after Adrianna randomly attacked her. She and Adrianna suspected they had seen Baby Nicole at The Clothes Hound and Sally was about to report this at the Gilead consulate, but Adrianna believed they should bring it directly and discreetly to Lydia themselves. Lydia assures Sally that it was only a psychotic break on Adrianna's part and Lydia will bury the truth of the matter for her. She tells Sally that she will spend some time at the Margery Kempe Retreat House to rest her mind—Lydia knows the staff will render Sally "incoherent" there, though they will not kill her.

Lydia's decision to send Sally to a retreat house where they will presumably destroy her mind characterizes Lydia as a disturbingly ruthless figure. Although her decision not to have Sally killed shows a certain level of restraint, this means very little in regard to the decision itself. Lydia is thus not a heroic figure, though she is working towards a noble aim. Rather, she sits in the dynamic role of an anti-hero, who does terrible and ruthless things as she deems them necessary for the sake of an ultimate good.

Lydia meets again with Judd, who reveals that his operatives recovered Mayday's communication method with whomever their source is in Gilead. They have been using a microdot camera, which prints a tiny microfilm only readable with an easily concealable viewing device. Lydia is inwardly fearful but makes a show of promising to put her Aunts to the search for more information, declaring that they will outwit Mayday. Lydia then leaves, retiring to a café for hot milk to soothe her nerves.

In spite of Lydia's previous ruthlessness, her conversation with Judd demonstrates that she is caught in a powerful yet precarious position, and such decisions as destroying Aunt Sally's mind are not done out of spite, but terrible necessity. Additionally, rather than the fearsome and mythic figure that Agnes imagines Lydia to be, she is a fearful human being like any other.

Lydia resumes recounting her time under arrest in the stadium. All the women continued to be held there for days. Some tried to cheer each other by singing hymns, but as the toilets overflowed and the bleachers and women were covered with human refuse, most simply felt like giving up. Lydia suspected the men were consciously "reducing [them] to animals." As days passed, more women arrived. Though Lydia and Anita were never friends before, they remained at each other's side as much as possible now, simply for the comfort of knowing someone else.

Lydia's intuition that the men are trying to reduce them to an animalistic state further suggests that the Sons of Jacob's primary intention is to control and subjugate women, not to embody some notion of religious virtue as they claim. If they can dehumanize women, they can more easily control them and more conveniently eliminate any sympathy they may feel for their prisoners.

Every afternoon there were executions by firing squad: the same lines of blindfolded women, the same uniformed man making his speech about God. But on the fourth day, three of the firing squad were women, wearing not business attire like the rest but brown robes that looked to be made of something like sackcloth. They shot the blindfolded women just the same. Lydia and Anita were horrified and thought these women must be monsters. The next day, six of the shooters were women, though one of them turned her rifle at the last moment and shot a uniformed man instead, before the other men killed her. More women arrived, but the numbers in the stadium stayed roughly balanced by the executions. On the sixth night, Anita was taken away in the middle of the night while Lydia slept.

The Sons of Jacob's incorporation of women into the firing squads suggests that they want to make these women complicit in the killings and thus connected to the regime. The sackcloth-like material their robes are made of is a reference to the Old Testament, in which people are often described wearing sackcloth as a sign of their penitence—their admission of guilt and request for forgiveness. This suggests that these women in the brown robes have decided to admit their own guilt for the crime of being female professionals, as the Sons of Jacob see it.

The next night, men woke Lydia by kicking her and dragged her out of the stadium. They put her in a van which deposited her at a repurposed police station. Inside, sitting at a boardroom table, she met Commander Judd of the Sons of Jacob. Judd asked Lydia if she was thankful to be alive and to be a woman. Lydia was unsure but realized that Judd was asking her to cooperate with their new regime. Judd simply wanted a yes or no answer, but Lydia refused to give one since she didn't know what she would be agreeing to. As a result, Judd sent Lydia to the Thank Tank and told her he'd pray that she determined the right answer.

Judd's promise that he'll pray for Lydia to submit to their regime, while simultaneously ordering her torture, embodies the insidious mixture of religion and authoritarianism present in Gilead and any other theocracy. Lydia's acquiescence would obviously be a result of torture, not God answering the prayer by changing her heart, but Judd could nevertheless claim that God is thus helping to build their regime, thus justifying his cruelty with religious fervor.

The Thank Tank turned out to be a small, unlit isolation cell. They left Lydia there for what seemed like days, though without any light or human contact her mind began to feel untethered, as if she was losing her grip on herself. From other cells down the hall she could occasionally hear women scream, being beaten or raped. Three times over the course of her stay, men with tasers entered her cell and beat her and electrocuted her. While this happened, one part of Lydia cried in pain and fear, but another newly-awakened part plotted its revenge, no matter how long it would take or how low she would have to stoop.

The fact that sexual assault occurs even in the earliest days of Gilead's rise to power again demonstrates that the Sons of Jacob are not primarily driven by notions of moral purity or arguably even religious zeal, but the desire for absolute power and control over women. This would suggest, then, that such people who seek to limit women's rights and control over their own lives are similarly not motivated by religious virtue, but the desire for power and control.

Lydia was finally taken out of the Thank Tank, only vaguely aware of where she was or what was happening. She was taken again by van to a modest hotel, and after her name was found on a list, was shown to a room and told to enjoy herself for three days. The room had every necessary amenity and good food, and Lydia spent the first two days eating delicious meals and taking hours of concurrent showers. The third day, however, she woke with most of her mental sharpness returned, and her situation began to dawn on her. Someone had laid out the same brown sackcloth robe she'd seen the female shooters in the stadium wear. Although she was horrified, she put it on, since there seemed to be no alternative.

The torture followed by generous treatment represents the two options Lydia has before her: she can resist the Sons of Jacob, suffer, and likely die; or, she can join them and be comfortable and well-provided for. Lydia's decision to don the brown robe almost seems an act of cowardice, but as she points out, it is merely an act of survival, as there seems to be no point in dying yet. This is supported by her earlier conviction that she will have her revenge, no matter how long it takes or how low she must stoop.

CHAPTER 25: TRANSCRIPT OF WITNESS TESTIMONY 369A

Agnes will describe the process of her marriage, which is typical of Gilead's arranged marriages. The family's goal is always to marry their daughter as soon as possible, so as to minimize the chance of youthful romance or adultery, which would result in a shameful public stoning.

Gilead's insistence that women be married as soon as possible, passed from parent to husband, represents yet another method of control and repression by minimizing women's opportunities to be independent or enjoy their sexuality during young adulthood.

When Agnes is 13, Paula calls her down to the living room where she, Aunt Vidala, and a new Aunt named Gabbana are waiting for her. They inspect her growing body, her teeth, and her hips while Aunt Gabbana takes notes on a clipboard. The Aunts announce that they will find three candidates for husbands from among the Commander families and will expect a "donation" from Paula. Paula smiles at Agnes and tells her how lucky of a girl she is, but by her "malicious little smirk" Agnes knows Paula is simply getting rid of her in a "socially acceptable manner."

The circumstances around Agnes's marriage, between the selecting of proper candidates to the "donation" that Paula must pay, makes Agnes as the bride seem more like a commodity that is being transferred between owners—especially since Paula simply wants to be rid of her—than an independent human being entering into a marital relationship. This fits with the devalued and dehumanized status of women in Gilead.

Paula announces that Agnes is done going to school, so Agnes spends her days fretting in her room alone. She embroiders a skull into a piece she is working on to represent Paula, though she claims its just a religious motif, like what one finds on the heads of gravestones. Agnes begins to wonder about the Aunts, who know how to read even though they are women—or perhaps they are not women under their clothes, or their brains are "neither male nor female."

The Aunts, who can obviously read, plan, and calculate just like any man, defy Gilead's narrow gender roles simply by existing. The fact that Agnes thinks that perhaps they are not true women reveals just how deep her own internalized belief—taught to her from birth—in women's mental inferiority to men has rooted itself.

Paula orders the Marthas to start packing all of Agnes's childhood toys in her room away into cardboard boxes, including the treasured dollhouse. They leave the wife doll in the window, however, but once they are gone, Agnes takes it and throws it across the room.

Paula's taking of Agnes's toys reflects the manner in which she is taking away Agnes's childhood by forcing her to marry young. Agnes's throwing of the the wife doll across the room suggests that she wants to reject such a role for herself.

CHAPTER 26

Aunt Gabbana arrives again with her underlings to decide what Agnes will wear. No one asks for her input or even tells her what will happen; she is a passive observer in her own marriage process. The Aunts take fittings and make new garments for each season, though Paula convinces them to make as few as possible. When they return, Agnes has seasonal clothes for the interim before the wedding, as well as new dresses for after.

Once again, Agnes is not even given the power to choose what she will wear before the wedding, demonstrating her near-total lack of personal agency or autonomy. Paula's desire to give Agnes as few new dresses as possible demonstrates her utter disdain for her stepdaughter.

CHAPTER 27

Agnes is enrolled in a "premarital preparatory school" to learn how to act the role of a high-ranking wife. Shunammite and Becka are there as well, both having received marriage offers from Commander families. Shunammite is eager sex and all the material benefits of marriage, but Becka is mortified. She'd begged her parents not to make her do this, but they'd argued it was the best offer she'd ever get, and if she got to 18 without being married, she'd be "dried goods" and no longer fit for a Commander's wife.

Becka's parents' argument that Becka would be "dried goods" at 18 is incredibly dehumanizing, once again suggesting that Becka's sole value as an individual and a human being is in her potential as a wife—particularly her sexual potential and fertility.

Even so, Becka is horrified at the thought of having sex with a man. The way that she describes her fear makes Agnes thinks that she has had some experience with it before, and then Agnes remembers her own experience with Dr. Grove and understands. Becka feels that marriage will "obliterate her" and bring her to an end. Shunammite thinks Becka is being weak, but Agnes hugs her tight.

Along with Becka's total lack of choice or personal agency, her fear that marriage will "obliterate her" suggests that she will lose her sense of herself as an individual person who thinks and makes decisions, since she will be relegated to the narrowly defined and unchosen role of somebody's wife.

CHAPTER 28

At preparatory school, Aunt Lise teaches the girls such skills as handling one's Handmaid, interior decorating, and flower arranging. Becka's wedding has been arranged for November, but Becka wishes she would develop a serious illness so she could avoid it. One day, while they are learning flower arrangements, Becka takes the secateurs (pruning scissors) and slashes her wrist, pouring her blood onto the floor. Agnes watches her face as she does it and notes that Becka looks ferocious, more determined than she'd ever seen her before. Paramedics arrive and carry Becka away. As she passes Agnes with a serene look on her face, Becka bids her goodbye.

Becka's suicide attempt represents a final act of autonomy. Rather than be forced into a marriage she doesn't want and lose her ability to choose, Becka makes the active choice to end her life on her own terms, rather than slowly withering away beneath someone else. Becka's decision that her power to choose is more important that life itself suggests that choice and personal agency are fundamental rights of a person and are critically important to one's well-being.

CHAPTER 29: THE ARDUA HALL HOLOGRAPH

Lydia has a recurring nightmare about the time after she emerged from the Thank Tank. She is standing in the stadium as one of the shooters, wearing the brown sackcloth robe. She is aiming a rifle at a line of former friends and colleagues, Handmaids, wives, and daughters she has judged. Some of them are mutilated, missing eyes or feet or fingers. When the rifles fire, Lydia feels a bullet go through her lungs.

Lydia's nightmare suggests she is weighed down with guilt over joining Gilead, which thus seems a betrayal of women, and a condemnation of herself as well. The women she has judged, now mutilated, suggest that these mutilations were punishments, for which Lydia feels additional guilt.

Lydia was taken from the hotel back to meet with Commander Judd, now wearing the brown robe. He asked if she had found "enlightenment" in her time in the Thank Tank and she said that she had. He ran through a file of her past life: professional career, several lovers, one abortion, one divorce. All of these were capital offenses for women now, punishable retroactively, but Judd would pass over them if Lydia agreed to work with their regime. Lydia unemotionally agreed, but Judd told her she would have to prove her new devotion.

All of the crimes that Commander Judd lists off are again fairly common and accepted occurrences in modern society, all of which offer modern women additional degrees of freedom and independence. This again suggests that the Sons of Jacob are primarily concerned with controlling and subjugating women, rather than adhering to a particular religious ideology.

Lydia was made part of a firing squad, executing yet another group of women. Anita was among those being shot, and Lydia wondered why she chose to die rather than have blood on her hands, though perhaps she simply wasn't "considered useful."

Lydia's view that cooperation with the unjust system is better than death directly contradicts not only Anita's willingness to die, but especially Becka's conviction that she will die rather than lose her ability to choose, making them an inverse of each other.

Lydia sat in the boardroom once again, this time with Helena, Elizabeth, and Vidala. Vidala was already wearing the Aunts' uniform and was clearly indoctrinated, but Elizabeth and Helena were in the brown robes like Lydia. Commander Judd explained that although many would see them as traitors for overthrowing the government, they were establishing a new order built on God's decrees, without the societal instability brought on by women having careers, being independence, and neglecting their duty to have families.

Once again, although Judd claims to be building a new regime built on God's laws and strictures, he blames societal instability not on breaking God's laws, but on women gaining increased freedoms and independence. This again suggests that while Gilead is certainly a theocracy enforced by dogmatic religion, its chief aim is subjugating and controlling women.

The three women, plus Vidala, were there to use their experience dealing with women to devise the "womanly sphere" of society, since the men did not understand them. They would be given advantages and power over women, though Vidala would act as their spiritual instructor. Lydia, already taking the leading role within the group, stated that if they were to do their work well, they needed independence from men and full control over their domain, free rein to operate as they saw fit. Vidala was wary of this, but Commander Judd accepted her proposition, stating that he did not want to be burdened with the "petty details of the female sphere." Thus, Gilead was born.

Judd's dependence on women to build and operate his new regime, along with his willing admission that he and his peers do not understand women, is both ironic and hypocritical. His contradiction points out the absolute falsehood of the premise that men are naturally more intelligent and more capable than women, and thus the only ones fit for running society or holding professional careers, especially since Judd allows the Aunts to operate independently.

The Founders, as they would come to be called, kept the pretense of unity and teamwork, but immediately began vying for power. Vidala assumed she would be the "natural leader" but was immediately usurped by Lydia, setting them up as opponents. Helena and Elizabeth were both weaker, broken by the Thank Tank and the horror of what they were taking part in. Judd regarded Lydia as the group's head and took credit for any ideas she presented that he saw as successful, causing him to be lauded by his male colleagues for his great work. Although part of Lydia hated what she was building, another part of her was oddly proud of the structure and the order and the limitations they overcame. "Things are never simple," and it seemed better to survive than to hold to one's principles and be obliterated.

Once again, the fact that Judd receives adulation from his male colleagues for ideas and plans that Lydia and her team of women devises is ironic. However, it also suggests that either Judd and his men fully understand that women are not truly mentally inferior but choose to propagate the myth so as to increase their own power and control, or that they honestly believe in this inferiority and lack even the self-awareness to realize that their male-dominated, woman-hating regime is entirely dependent on women's intellect and intuition.

As Lydia's power and influence grew, Judd even asked for her forgiveness for the harshness with which she was treated. He tried to ease her conscience by telling her that during the firing squad, her rifle contained a blank instead of a round, so she didn't actually kill anyone. Lydia suspected that Commander Judd was beginning to fear her.

The fact that Judd defers to Lydia and tries to ease her conscience suggests that her power is growing far faster than he ever anticipated. Lydia's rise in the ranks demonstrates the vast amount of power that that the right knowledge can grant, even in an oppressive environment like Gilead.

Back in Gilead, in the present, Lydia returns her manuscript to its hiding place and makes her way to the café for a cup of milk. Vidala accosts her on the way, seeking an audience, and Lydia invites her to join her. Over drinks, Vidala expresses her concern that individuals are leaving food offerings in front of Lydia's statue, and that this practice borders on heretical cult worship. Lydia says she will consider this, but Vidala continues that it is Aunt Elizabeth who is doing so, possibly as part of a larger scheme to discredit Lydia by claiming she is amassing followers. Lydia thanks Vidala and wonders if perhaps Vidala is coming to her side, rather than opposing her as she always does. In any case it is a welcome opportunity to thin out her opponents.

The in-fighting and power contests between the Aunts and Commanders is typical of any authoritarian regime built on oppressive power and control throughout history. As is often the case, the more power that Lydia gathers for herself, the greater of a threat she represents for others. Thus, she consequently becomes a greater target for political attack, demonstrating the complicated power struggles that occur in such regimes. Such constant in-fighting suggests that any such authoritarian regime will ultimately destroy itself as its members consume each other in their quest for more power.

CHAPTER 30: TRANSCRIPT OF WITNESS TESTIMONY 369B

Nicole tries to grapple with what Elijah just revealed about her true identity. She feels as if her whole self and history has just been wiped away. She wishes it all wasn't true. Elijah and Ada continue to explain that although Nicole's biological father isn't a Commander, her legal father is, according to Gilead, so they have a legal claim to her as long as she's underage—and they'd stoop to illegal measures as well. Nicole realizes that this is why Neil and Melanie didn't want her at the march, where she'd be seen on the news, and feels guilty for their deaths, though Ada tells her that Gilead had already targeted The Clothes Hound days before. Elijah leaves to make arrangements and find another car.

Once again, Gilead's use of illegal measures and even kidnapping demonstrates that they are not a bastion of moral purity as they claim to be, but a conniving authoritarian state. Nicole's earlier feeling that Baby Nicole was simply treated like a football seems to lend to her feeling that her identity has been wiped away. Before, she was Daisy, with Daisy's thoughts and lived experiences. Now, she is simply Nicole, the icon who was never seen as a person unto herself, but only a contested symbol between two opposing sides.

Elijah returns a few hours later with George, the street man of whom Nicole used to be afraid. George saw the Eyes in The Clothes Hound with Neil and Melanie for several hours before they marched them out to the car and put the bomb in there with them. George doesn't know if Neil and Melanie were tortured or gave up information, so they must move again. Ada takes Nicole downstairs to another apartment, which belongs to someone named Garth, and warns Nicole that she might not like what's coming next.

George's role as a Mayday operative suggests that Neil and Melanie's network was extensive and surrounded Nicole's life. The fact that Ada and Nicole have to hide like fugitives in their own country, which opposes Gilead's interference, suggests that Gilead's reach in Canada is disturbingly and powerful.

CHAPTER 31

Garth, a 25-year-old man, comes in dressed all in black. He's arranged another industrial van, which Ada and Nicole climb into, finding a mattress set up in the back that they sit on. As they drive, Ada tells Nicole that both her real mother and father are deep in hiding, but Ada has been sending pictures of Nicole to her mother throughout her lifetime. Ada was one of the people who helped smuggle Nicole out of Gilead years ago, hiking through the Vermont forest with Baby Nicole drugged in a backpack so she wouldn't cry or scream. That smuggling route is out of commission now though.

Ada's admission that she's been secretly sending Nicole's mother pictures of her throughout her lifetime, and that she was one of the people involved in smuggling Nicole out of Gilead, means that Ada has been secretly watching over Nicole for the last 15 years. Although Nicole hardly knows Ada, this puts Ada in an almost motherly position in relation to Nicole, especially now that Neil and Melanie are dead.

They arrive at a carpet wholesaler called Carpitz which has a large, locked-off storage room divided into cubicles in the back, each with a mattress and blanket in it. Nobody in the store except for Garth knows who Nicole is, and they intend to keep it that way. Garth leaves to go find food while Ada and Nicole watch TV. The bombing is still on the news, but there are no charges. Nothing is truly being done about it, which causes Nicole a mixture of anger and sadness. Neil and Melanie weren't well-known figures, so there is little public pressure. The Gilead embassy is blaming Aunt Adrianna's death on the Mayday terrorist organization and is pressuring Canada's government to root them out.

Once again, the fact that Canada is not pressing harder on The Clothes Hound bombing to investigate it or make any charges suggests that they know it was Gilead, but that their hands are tied by their fear of Gilead's power and reach. Meanwhile, Gilead exerts its own pressure on Canada to help it achieve its own goals by uprooting Mayday, demonstrating the extent of Gilead's authoritarian power.

CHAPTER 32

In the morning, Elijah announces that they need to move Nicole again as soon as possible. Gilead is using its large and aggressive military to pressure Canada into going after Mayday. They're not sure where to put her, however, since Canada is becoming less safe and most European countries have closed their borders to Gilead refugees. They'd had a source—they don't know who—in Gilead who was smuggling information through microdots glued onto Pearl Girls' brochures, but that method was discovered after The Clothes Hound was broken into, so their information's been cut off.

Once again, Canada and the European countries apparent fear of Gilead suggests that their military might—which echoes America's military might before it—allows them to bully others and maintain their authoritarian practices, even while the rest of the world maintains their democracies. Mention of their source, who is obviously Lydia, again suggests that Lydia has been an integral player in Gilead's resistance efforts, even while she supported and operated within Gilead's power structure.

However, before their contact with the source was severed, the source told them that they have a cache of incriminating documents and information that could bring Gilead down if it could be smuggled out. The source proposed that the only way that could happen is if they send Nicole back into Gilead as a new convert, and she could be used to traffic the information back out. This plan disturbs Nicole, but the others assure her that Gilead would never kill her since she's too valuable, and they'll teach her how to act and defend herself.

Nicole is effectively pressured into taking on such a role, whether Mayday asks for her consent or not, by the circumstances around her and the fact that she is the only person capable of smuggling the information and taking down Gilead. This demonstrates the manner in which an individual's choice may be limited by circumstance, forcing them to sacrifice their own personal agency for a greater good.

CHAPTER 33

Although Nicole never explicitly agrees to the plan, wanting time to think about it, everyone acts as if she has and she is swept into it anyway. Garth sets up a makeshift gym in the cubicles and starts training Nicole for several hours a day, both for building stamina and teaching her how to fight. As they train, Nicole learns that Garth was raised in the Republic of Texas, and his older brothers were killed in Texas's war with Gilead. Garth teaches Nicole how to throw a "heartstopper punch" and how to gouge someone's eyes out with her thumbs. Nicole is worried that this will hurt the other person, but Garth and Ada insist that she needs to know how to kill.

Although Nicole's involvement in the plan serves a good and noble purpose, taking down an oppressive theocratic regime, her lack of choice in the matter echoes Agnes and Becka's own lack of choice as women in Gilead, suggesting that the same error of disrespecting a woman's personal agency can be committed even by those people who do not intentionally suppress woman. Garth's mention of Texas's war against Gilead suggests that not every state in the U.S. currently belongs to Gilead.

Ada teaches Nicole how to pray like they do in Gilead, though Nicole struggles to remember it all. They tell Nicole that she'll pose as a street person with Garth, who will be there to watch out for her, posing as her boyfriend. Hopefully Nicole will get picked up by the Pearl Girls and taken into Gilead. It will be difficult, and they've sent operatives with Pearl Girls before with "mixed results," but once Nicole is in Gilead, they believe the source will protect her.

Although the operatives refuse to say so explicitly, Mayday's mixed results with infiltration efforts into Gilead suggest that they've had several operatives killed by Gilead authorities, meaning that they are knowingly sending Nicole into a very dangerous environment, raising the stakes around this mission which Nicole was not given the choice to opt out of.

Garth tells Nicole—she'll go by Jade during the mission—that once they're on the streets, she'll need to be mature and follow his orders, which she's been reluctant to do thus far. She'll also need a tattoo— "God" and "love" arranged like a cross on her forearm. The source made this stipulation non-negotiable, perhaps as a way for the Pearl Girls to identify her. Nicole thinks this is hypocritical, since she was raised an atheist, but Ada insists that it's necessary. One of Ada's friends comes to do the tattoo, scarring it as well so it's raised off her skin. They dye her hair pastel green and change her clothes yet again. The night before they leave, Nicole wonders if the source isn't merely a decoy, and if she isn't walking into a trap.

Although Nicole is 16, in her noted immaturity she often behaves much more childishly than Agnes and Becka did as 12-year-olds. This seems to suggest that growing up in such a repressive and difficult environment as Gilead prematurely ages girls like Becka and Agnes, since they are constantly forced to reckon with topics like death, forced marriage, and authoritarianism. Nicole, living in the relative freedom and safety of Canada for most of her life, was able to extend her childhood and childish behavior.

CHAPTER 34: THE ARDUA HALL HOLOGRAPH

Lydia installs two remote surveillance cameras in the foot of her statue, hoping to capture evidence of Elizabeth placing offerings for the statue and plotting against her. Instead, the cameras capture footage of Vidala secretly putting eggs and oranges in front of the statue and dropping a handkerchief embroidered to look as if it belongs to Lydia herself. This is a great surprise to Lydia, though not an unwelcome one. Now she has evidence of Vidala's treachery and can turn Elizabeth easily against her, and perhaps Helena as well, in case one of them needs to be framed and sacrificed. Lydia is at the "turning point" but she does not intend to back down. Soon, she will tell Commander Judd that Baby Nicole is back in Gilead, within her grasp.

As she often does, Lydia deftly plays both sides in the conflict, occupying a confusing space as neither a good nor evil character. Her happy surprise at the fact that Vidala is trying to frame her demonstrates her understanding of the way that damning knowledge can gift power over someone else. Meanwhile, her intention to report Nicole's return to Judd appears on the surface like a betrayal of Nicole and Mayday. However, recognizing how elaborate and long-running Lydia's schemes are, her motivation is uncertain.

To explain, Lydia goes back to an even that occurred nine years before. Aunt Lise entered her office, wringing her hands, and told Lydia about Becka's attempted suicide with the secateurs. Although they'd tried counseling and threats of death, Becka insisted that she would try to kill herself again if they forced her to marry anyone at all. Lydia asked if it was bearing children that Becka objected to, but Lise insisted that Becka liked children, but that she had a nearly phobic fear of penises. Lydia reflected that perhaps their education system placed too much emphasis on the threats that pensises represent, though obviously they could not teach "the theoretical delights of sex" either. Lise mentioned that Becka claimed a "higher calling," meaning she wanted to be made an Aunt. Lydia decided that this was better than Becka killing herself, so allowed for a probationary trial as an Aunt.

Becka's phobic fear of penises and sexuality, as well as Lydia's recognition that Gilead cannot teach women about the pleasure of sex, suggests that Gilead's attempts to sexually repress women have long-lasting consequences, leaving deep marks on young women's psyches. Once again, Lydia's allowance for Becka to escape marriage by becoming an Aunt suggests that she is intentionally saving Becka from the marital system that she herself had a hand in shaping as one of the Founders, once again portraying Lydia as a complex, morally-ambiguous character.

Aunt Lydia brought Becka in for an interview and explained the path she would take as an Aunt: six months on probation, and then the Founders would make their decision, at which point Becka would be a Supplicant Aunt until she served her mission as a Pearl Girl. Becka eagerly accepted all of this. Lydia asked Becka if she was ever sexually abused, but Becka insisted she did not want to speak of it. Lydia did not push this but assured Becka that she would be safe in Ardua Hall and that justice would be served, eventually, even if only behind the scenes. Lydia sent Becka with Lise to receive her uniform and begin her reading lessons. Becka was overwhelmed with gratitude and Lydia noted that that would be useful in the future. She had rescued many such girls through Ardua Hall.

Once again, Lydia's private admission in her narrative that she has been rescuing girls by making them Aunts suggests that she has been both supporting Gilead and subverting its ends for many years. Along with establishing Lydia as a cunning and complicated character, this also suggests that Ardua Hall, the domain of Aunts and thus the domain of women, is a sort of sanctuary for women who cannot live within Gilead's oppressive, narrowly-gendered regime, and who desire to think and act and speak as the free and intelligent individuals they are.

CHAPTER 35: TRANSCRIPT OF WITNESS TESTIMONY 369A

After Becka's suicide attempt, Agnes often worries about her, but Shunammite thinks she was only looking for attention. This disagreement causes Agnes and Shunammite to grow apart. Aunt Gabbana visits Agnes's home and announces they have three marriage candidates for Agnes to choose from, though Agnes knows it will not actually be her choice. Most impressive among them is Commander Judd, whose young wife has recently died, and who is very powerful and important. The other two are younger, though less prestigious matches. Aunt Gabbana promises that Agnes's parents want her to be happy, though she knows they just want to be rid of her. While she lays in bed that night, she imagines each of the three of the candidates on top of her, "trying to shove his loathsome appendage" into her dead body, cold and white like Ofkyle's.

Although Agnes is given three marriage candidates to choose from, she knows that it is only the illusion of choice, a pretense to make the situation seem a little less oppressive and unbearable. Agnes's vision of her own body as a cold corpse while each candidate crawls on top of her is graphic and disturbing. The fact that Agnes imagines herself to be dead like Ofkyle suggests that, like Becka, Agnes believes that such a marriage and ordeal would destroy her sense of self, her personhood, and any sense of agency she might once have possessed; she will be reduced to a body for someone to have sex with.

CHAPTER 36

Agnes considers running away, though she's never been taught any geography and does not know to where she'd run to. Meanwhile Commander Kyle and Paula do their best to convince Agnes to marry their choice, Judd. Weddings are easier when the bride is willing; some families have had to resort to injecting the bride with tranquilizers. Even the Marthas try to convince Agnes that marriage is a good thing and that suicide is a terrible thing to do. Agnes considers it, though, contemplating whether she should cut her wrists (though she has no access to secateurs) or hang herself. By the week's end, Agnes is engaged to Commander Judd. He visits the house to meet her and kisses her on the forehead with warm, loose lips. Agnes is disgusted and tries not to envision their wedding night.

Once again, the fact that parents occasionally resort to drugging the bride so as to make her pliable and able to get through the wedding demonstrates women's utter lack of choice and agency in Gilead. Under drugs or tranquilizers, any such wedding is obviously not their own choice, and any sexual contact is nothing less than sexual assault. Although this is a horrific situation, Atwood mentions in the Acknowledgements of the novel that she did not include any situation unless there was a historical precedent for it, suggesting that such horrific treatment of women has actually occurred in human history.

The wedding planners arrive and begin discussing details and preparations with Agnes and Paula. They note Agnes's demeanor and suggest she be given a drink with a sedative. Everyone besides Agnes acts cheerful, but Agnes can tell Paula just wants it to be over with and Agnes out of her sight. With details arranged, the wedding will take place in two weeks, as soon as the wedding dress is made. Agnes regards these as the last 14 days of her life.

Once again, the wedding planners' suggestion that Agnes be sedated reiterates her own lack of choice or personal agency. Agnes's feeling that her life will end on her wedding day again echoes Becka's sentiment that marriage will kill her, effectively ending her sense of self, personhood, and independent agency.

CHAPTER 37

The days pass and Agnes grows "desperate." She often contemplates methods of suicide or perhaps even trying to murder Commander Judd on their wedding night, but she knows that she lacks Becka's resolve to follow through with any of them. At night, Agnes wishes that someone would come to rescue her, but it seems impossible.

Although Agnes is one of the three main characters and Becka occupies only a supporting role, Becka's strength, resolve, and kindness make her arguably the most noble and heroic figure of any of them, exhibiting inner strength where Agnes exhibits only passivity.

Three days before the wedding, while Paula is out of the house, Aunt Lydia pays Agnes a surprise visit and tells Agnes that Becka is safe, living as an Aunt in Ardua Hall. She heavily implies to Agnes that she can take the same path but must approach Aunt Estée herself to claim her higher calling. Lydia will handle Commander Judd. After Lydia leaves and Paula returns, Agnes knows that Paula will lock her in her room if she suspects what is happening. Agnes asks if she may go speak to the wedding planners at Shunammite's house—like Agnes, Shunammite is preparing for her own wedding. Paula gives Agnes permission, happy to have her out of the house, and sends her with a driver.

Once again, Lydia demonstrates that she not only passively protects women by letting them become Aunts to escape forced marriage, but actively undermines Gilead's main social convention, proactively extending herself and thus risking her own power and reputation in order to rescue young women. Although Lydia was decidedly the villain of The Handmaid's Tale, access to her inner narrative and schemes recasts Lydia in the reader's mind as something of an anti-hero.

Agnes visits Shunammite and invents a reason to ask the wedding planners a benign question, then insists she needs to leave. However, she asks the driver to bring her by the school so she may thank Aunt Estée for her kindness over the years. The driver is hesitant to not follow Paula's orders exactly, but Agnes reminds him that she'll be a powerful wife soon and will see him rewarded, touching her hand to his as she does so. The driver begins to soften, so Agnes lifts her skirt to show a bit of her ankle as well, and the driver agrees. He takes her to the school and drops her off with the Angels who escort her inside, and Agnes tells him to wait for her.

The fact that Agnes's showing a bit of ankle is enough to entice her driver and send a subliminally sexual message—even though an ankle is hardly an object of sexual allure in the modern world—suggests that conventions of modesty are socially constructed. In a society where women are strictly forbidden from exposing any part of their bodies, revealing the ankle from beneath a long skirt can seem as suggestive as a flash of nudity.

Agnes meets Aunt Estée inside and tells her about the horrible marriage and that she will either kill herself or cut Commander Judd's throat. Aunt Estée understands, asking if she has received a higher calling. Agnes says that she has. Aunt Estée and Agnes both know that Agnes cannot return home since Paula would lock her away until the marriage, nor can she remain at the school, since the Eyes could come and claim her. Estée decides that she will take Agnes away with her. Estée informs the driver that Agnes will be going with her instead, and he is angry at being tricked, but under the watchful eye of Estée's Angels he can do nothing. As Estée and Agnes drive away from the school in the Aunt's car, Agnes cries, feeling hopeless. Estée assures her that if they "have faith," things will work out.

Agnes's flee to the Aunts, though prompted by Lydia, represents an exertion of her own agency and choice, particularly since she had to devise her own scheme to reach Aunt Estée. This is a critical development for Agnes's character, marking one of the first times in her life she is able to make a significant decision for herself. It marks the beginning of her life as a woman with the power to choose, learn, and decide for herself, even if she does not realize it yet. The fact that Paula would lock Agnes away rather than let her make her own choice suggests that Paula opposes, even fears, Agnes obtaining any sense of personal agency.

CHAPTER 38

As Aunt Estée and Agnes drive, Estée reveals that they are going to Ardua Hall. Agnes has only heard of Ardua Hall from the Marthas, who regard it as a bad place where the Aunts "get their hands dirty," which intrigues Agnes. Estée explains that all the Aunts live in Ardua Hall.

Although the narratives heavily dwell on the lives of the Aunts, the Martha's derision of Ardua Hall and apparent ignorance of what the Aunts actually do suggests that their actions are largely concealed from Gilead's society.

Aunt Estée and Agnes arrive, passing Lydia's statue on the way in. Agnes is surprised to see writing on the walls and doors, which is normally forbidden in public. Agnes will be safe here for now, since men are expressly forbidden from entering. Aunt Estée finds a cup of milk for Agnes, though Agnes wonders if it's drugged, and Estée leaves her in the care of another Aunt while she leaves to make arrangements. Agnes sees a book sitting on a table, and since she has already broken many laws today, walks over and stares at it, wondering what makes it so dangerous.

Once again, the fact that men are not allowed to enter Ardua Hall establishes it as a women's domain, a sanctuary from domineering men in a society that gives men as much power over women as it possibly can. Agnes's surprise that Ardua Hall has writing on its walls, and her feeling that the book must contain some hidden danger, demonstrate the great lengths to which any form of knowledge is forbidden from women in Gilead.

CHAPTER 39

Agnes opens the book and finds that it seems utterly harmless. There are lots of pages with black markings that resemble insects to her. Becka calls out from behind her, remarking that reading is hard at first but gets easier. They embrace, and Agnes tells Becka about the terrible man she almost married.

Again, Agnes's surprise that a book is not full of some malicious power, but just letters on a page, suggests that she was raised to fear books as a method of keeping women as ignorant as possible, separate from any source of knowledge.

Becka explains that she has made it through her probation and become a Supplicant Aunt, and in nine years she'll become a Pearl Girl. Probation is not so hard, she reassures Agnes, one only has to work hard and obey orders. Becka will see if they can live together. However, she warns Agnes to never speak ill of Lydia, even in private, since Lydia has ears everywhere and is terrifying. While Vidala wants girls to make mistakes, Lydia seems able to understand people and push them to be "better than you are." Agnes thinks this sounds "inspirational."

Once again, although Lydia is effectively both Becka and Agnes's savior, as she apparently is for many other women, she is still a figure of fear and power. This suggests that Lydia's reputation across Gilead and among the Aunts has achieved a nearly mythic, god-like quality that is both revered and feared, particularly in her ability to obtain information and hear things that were not meant to be heard.

CHAPTER 40

Paula, furious about Agnes's move to join the Aunts, visits Ardua Hall to convince her to change her mind. During their conversation, Paula insists that the Aunts will require Commander Kyle's permission to nullify the marriage arrangement, and he'll never give it. However, Lydia enters and speaks to Paula privately. Agnes cannot hear what she says, but when Lydia walks out, Paula looks ill and proceeds to leave wordlessly. Kyle gives his permission that afternoon.

Lydia's total control over Paula through some secret piece of information demonstrates the great power that damning knowledge can grant one person over another and serves as an isolated example of that manner in which Lydia controls and manipulates other powerful people.

The next step for Agnes is to be interviewed by each of the Founders. Becka gives her advice on how to handle each Aunt during her successive interviews. Elizabeth wants to see that Agnes is dedicated to "the greater good," so Agnes shows it, even expressing sympathy for Judd's disappointment at the marriage being called off. Helena simply wants their interview over quickly, since Lydia has already made up her mind and Helena must follow suit. Vidala is difficult to convince, since she's never liked Agnes and thinks she is "shirking" her duty as a woman. However, when Agnes praises Vidala's character and says she aspires to have even a fraction of her virtue, Vidala decides she has shown thee "appropriate meekness" and consents as well.

Agnes's interviews encapsulate each of the three Aunts' personalities, which is helpful in understanding their characters since both Elizabeth and Helena are often present but rarely seen taking any action of their own within the story. Elizabeth is revealed as an idealist, and Helena as a weak-willed survivor who simply follows whoever is strongest. Vidala is aptly described as an egotistical power-monger who desires to see others capitulate themselves to her, which is notable since it defies traditional expectations of women in Gilead, even though Vidala herself claims to be committed to these standards.

Agnes interviews with Aunt Lydia last, and she is terrified that the powerful woman might change her mind. However, Lydia congratulates her on making her way to Ardua Hall. She announces that Shunammite will marry Judd in her place, and although Agnes worries for Shunammite, she knows that the girl envied her future marriage to Judd, and she will have 10 times as much wealth and benefits with Judd than with her other potential husband. Agnes thanks Lydia profusely for helping her, but Lydia responds that someday Agnes will be called on to help Lydia as well, since that is how life works in Ardua Hall.

Although Shunammite is not a particularly sympathetic character, but Lydia's decision still evokes sympathy in the reader—assigning Shunammite to marry Commander Judd, with full knowledge that Judd murders his wives, is a death sentence for Shunammite. This depicts Lydia as both generous and altruistic for rescuing Becka and Agnes, and yet stunningly ruthless at times. Lydia's character, caught in a web of machinations, ploys, and basic survival, demonstrates the morally ambiguous position of power within an unjust regime, even if one has good intentions.

CHAPTER 41: THE ARDUA HALL HOLOGRAPH

Although it takes years of waiting and listening through her microphones, Aunt Lydia finally discovers the story of what happened to Becka. With Lydia secretly listening through a microphone in the wall, Becka tells Agnes about how Dr. Grove sexually abused her when she was four years old. Agnes is horrified, but Becka will not testify—women in Gilead are never believed anyway—and decides that she will simply give her suffering to God. This is not enough for Lydia, especially since she was once a judge.

Becka's belief that her account of Dr. Grove's abuse would be simply dismissed nods to the fact that even in modern democratic nations, society is often slow to take any accusations of sexual misconduct seriously, especially when they involve powerful or highly regarded men. By depicting this real-life failing in Gilead, Atwood condemns modern society's slowness to believe women when they testify to being sexually assaulted.

Lydia summons Aunt Elizabeth for a meeting and asks if she thinks herself a fox or a cat—a reference to one of Aesop's fables where a clever fox outsmarts himself with all his tricks and is killed by hunters, while the cat simply climbs a tree and hides, but survives. Lydia surmises that Elizabeth is a cat, but suggests it is time to be a fox, and tells her that Vidala is plotting Elizabeth's downfall. But Lydia will protect her on one condition: Elizabeth must give a false testimony, as happens often in Gilead.

Elizabeth's false testimony will obviously be angled at Dr. Grove to bring him to justice, demonstrating the manner in which knowledge as power can be used to even seek justice for unaccounted wrongdoings. Lydia's extra-judicial pursuit of Dr. Grove essentially equates to vigilante justice, yet in a society such as Gilead where there is no justice at all, especially for women, such an action is arguably justified.

CHAPTER 42: TRANSCRIPT OF WITNESS TESTIMONY 369B

Nicole, now going by Jade as instructed, begins living on the streets with Garth, both wearing old ratty clothes like street people. Jade is secretly infatuated with Garth but does not know how to flirt. They start by panhandling outside of a bank. Jade is nervous and irritable and snaps at Garth over nothing, but Garth tells her to save her anger "for Gilead." Jade knows she is being childish but feels like Garth draws it out of her.

Once again, Jade is depicted as childish, especially in comparison to Agnes or Becka, which seems to suggest that, having grown up in a much safer, freer environment, Jade was not forced to develop the caution and seriousness that Agnes and Becka always maintain.

As they are sitting on the sidewalk, two Pearl Girls approach and Garth warns Jade to stay silent. When they ask Jade if he is prostituting her and if she wants to come with them, where no one is homeless, Garth puts his arm over her protectively and angrily tells them off. Although Jade knows the Pearl Girls are evil, she's touched by their kind demeanor. The Pearl Girls leave, confusing Jade since she'd assumed they'd take her right away, but Garth promises they'll be back.

The brief gratitude that Jade feels for the Pearl Girls, despite knowing the oppression towards women they represent, suggests that young women such as Jade must be enticed into Gilead by the Pearl Girls' gentleness and kind demeanors before they are able to realize what kind of society they've truly entered into.

CHAPTER 43

For the next several days, Jade and Garth live together in the streets, sleeping under bridges or in a cemetery. Garth wraps his arms around Jade whenever they sleep since he's posing as her boyfriend, but Jade lets her mind pretend that he truly is her "first boyfriend." Garth keeps her away from other street people as much as possible, since any of them could be a Gilead operative. Jade mentions that she is impressed that Garth protects her even "from himself." He never takes advantage of his position, even though it must be obvious that Jade is infatuated with him.

Garth, only ever portrayed as an upstanding character, is careful to respect Nicole's sexual agency in spite of their conditions which would make it easy for her him to take advantage of her. Nicole's appreciation of this fact and Garth's depiction as a good man in general again suggest that respecting an individual's personal agency is critically important for anyone, but especially for women.

CHAPTER 44

On the fifth day, while Garth is away getting food from a fast-food joint, the Pearl Girls approach Jade while she is alone, introducing themselves as Aunt Beatrice and Aunt Dove. They ask Jade if Garth ever hits her or forces her to have sex, and she says yes, but she fled violence at home, so now she is with him. The Pearl Girls promise that in Gilead, no man will ever hurt a girl like her because she is a "precious flower." When Garth returns, he acts angry and tries to take Jade away until one of the Aunts takes him aside and offers him money to sell Jade to them. Garth takes the money and leaves without a word. The Aunts remark that Jade is lucky he sold her to them instead of "some sex ring."

Although the Pearl Girls act kind and promise that they can offer Nicole a place where she will be safe and treasured, it is obvious that this is a lie. Such a lie is especially insidious, however, since the Pearl Girls' questions to Nicole suggest that they primarily "convert," or entrap, vulnerable women who are already trapped in abusive or violent relationships, poverty, or other hopeless situation. However, bringing such women into Gilead is only taking them from one toxic and abusive environment to another.

Jade goes with the Pearl Girls to their rented condo, and privately wonders if this is the same one in which Aunt Adrianna was murdered, but she doesn't ask for fear of ruining the plan. The Aunts advise her to take a shower but to be mindful of the tattoo so the scabs don't rip off, since it is still healing. When Jade gets out of the shower, she sees that the Aunts have thrown away her old clothes and laid out a silvery dress for her, identical to theirs. They explain that Canada wrongly views their taking of underage converts back to Gilead as human trafficking, so she will take Aunt Dove's place and identification to return instead. Also, Jade can no longer wear men's clothing—including leggings—because it is an "abomination" before God.

Canada's recognition of the Pearl Girl missionaries bringing converts back to Gilead as human trafficking is validated by the fact that the Pearl Girls have to go through an elaborate and illegal ruse to move converts out of Canada and into Gilead. Depicting the missionaries' work as human trafficking again suggests that the Pearl Girls prey on vulnerable women and are thus predatory. The fact that the Pearl Girls are exclusively women demonstrates that even women may be coopted into aiding the predatory efforts of men to exploit other women.

They eat dinner and Jade goes to sleep, noting that the Pearl Girls lock her in at night and never allow her to be alone while she is awake. Jade is thankful to sleep in a bed after nearly a week on the streets, but she misses Garth. Over the next few days, they take Jade to the Gilead embassy to be photographed and fingerprinted so that Aunt Dove's passport can be altered to fit Jade. After this is finished, they go easily through customs, leaving Aunt Dove behind until she will trade places with another Pearl Girl. They take a private jet painted with the logo of the Eyes back to Gilead. Jade is leaving behind her home and everything she has ever known.

The Pearl Girls' locking of Jade in her bedroom at night and refusal to allow her to be alone at any point during the day suggests that they are immediately taking away Nicole's right to choose, as well as any form of privacy. Nicole's sacrifice of her personal agency suggests that, although such agency is critically important to one's well-being, sometimes it may be necessary to sacrifice it for the sake of a greater cause beyond themselves.

CHAPTER 45

Jade looks out the window of the jet and sees the countryside and tall, pretty buildings below. Shortly after, they land in Gilead. Aunt Beatrice walks her down the steps between rows of black-uniformed men, whom the Pearl Girl warns Jade not to look at. Jade feels more vulnerable under their stares than ever before in her life, and she is surprised when they suddenly all salute. Aunt Beatrice tells Jade that this is to honor her, since Beatrice's mission is complete—she has brought back a "Pearl."

Aside from Aunt Lydia and her statue, the uniformed men saluting Aunt Beatrice is the only instance of Gilead men honoring women for anything. The fact that they will only honor a woman for trafficking another young woman into Gilead to incorporate them into the terrible and oppressive regime suggests that they only value women when they help them to prey on other women.

They are taken by car into the city and to a large building. Beatrice tells Jade they must immediately go to the Thanks Giving ceremony, where all the new Pearls will be welcomed. In a large hall with many other Pearl Girls and recent converts, all around Jade's age, Lydia stands and makes a speech, welcoming the Pearl Girls home and congratulating them on their successful missions. Beatrice presents Jade to Lydia, who places her hand on Jade's head and blesses them both. Jade thinks the whole affair is "weird as fuck."

The Pearl Girls' mission to bring back young new converts, which are apparently always women, is disturbing enough. It is more disturbing that Lydia herself presides over it, again depicting her as a complex character who both opposes a predatory system yet also participates in it at the highest levels. Nicole's inner thought suggests that she will struggle to suppress her own derision and maintain her cover as a new convert.

CHAPTER 46: THE ARDUA HALL HOLOGRAPH

In Commander Judd's office, Lydia drinks coffee with him and watches a "Particicution" through his viewing screen. Judd adds rum to his coffee to steel his nerves, but Lydia declines it for herself. The two men to be executed are an Angel charged with black market dealing (though truly suspected of helping Mayday smuggle Handmaids out of Gilead) and Dr. Grove, who's been charged with the attempted rape of Aunt Elizabeth. Elizabeth faked the attempted rape but did so convincingly, and Dr. Grove had little real defense to make, especially in light of his actual sexual abuse of underage girls.

Dr. Grove's extra-judicial execution—though arguably still justified—alongside an Angel also executed under a false pretense suggests that such false testimonies as Aunt Elizabeth gave, and executions made on false pretenses, are common practices in Gilead, demonstrating the corruption within the regime that seems to be standard practice. The fact that Commander Judd relies on alcohol to steel his nerves is ironic, given that he himself commits grotesque acts and rules in a regime of horrific practices.

Elizabeth presides over the Particicutions in the stadium, first for the Angel, then for Dr. Grove. For each, when Elizabeth gives the signal, 70 Handmaids beat each man to death and literally tear their bodies to pieces. All of the Aunts, Supplicants, and new Pearls are there to watch, and Aunt Immortelle (Becka) feints as she watches her father be killed.

The Handmaids, who are normally subdued and silent, act with such rage and ferocity that it suggests that they are releasing their repressed rage towards men caused by their oppression. As during Lydia's arrest, the stadium is a place of execution, where women are coopted into participating in Gilead's violence.

In Judd's office, he turns off the screen and expresses his sympathies for Dr. Grove, asking if he was truly guilty. Lydia reveals that he did not rape Elizabeth but that he was a pedophile, and many young girls, such as Agnes, escaped to the Aunts after being abused by him. Changing the subject, Lydia reveals to Judd that Nicole is now in Gilead—thrilling Judd—though she is still a secret and does not yet know her own identity. Judd is concerned about whether she is still a virgin, but Lydia surmises she is. However, Lydia wants to wait to reveal her to the world until she is fully converted to the faith and purified of worldliness. Judd and Lydia toast to Lydia's accomplishments and their combined success.

Lydia's frank admission that she had Dr. Grove torn to pieces for being a pedophile is particularly bold, given that Judd himself is also a pedophile—even if he legally marries his child brides. This demonstrates the scope of Lydia's power, gained through dangerous knowledge, despite being a woman, since she knows that she is untouchable enough to even subliminally challenge Judd's own sexual misconduct, despite the fact that he is one of the most powerful men in Gilead. However, Lydia's revelation to Judd that Nicole is now in Gilead suggests that she is manipulating not only Gilead, but Mayday as well.

After the Particicution, Elizabeth has a nervous breakdown and is sent to a retreat house. Lydia and Vidala visit her, and Lydia knows that Elizabeth, having committed a massive perjury, is completely under her control, and set against Vidala.

Once again, Lydia's absolute control over Elizabeth through her knowledge of her own crimes demonstrates that the right knowledge can grant one immense power.

CHAPTER 47

Agnes first sees Jade at the Pearl Girls ceremony, and though she thinks Jade looks around in a manner "that verges on being too bold," she does not think much of her otherwise. The next day holds the Particicution, which is an intense way for Jade to be introduced to Gilead. Agnes is not sad to see Dr. Grove killed, but Becka feels responsible and guilty for it since he was still her father, and they both know that Lydia overheard their conversation somehow. That is how Aunts operate, after all, by gathering and employing information.

Agnes's realization that the Aunts do their work by gathering and weaponizing information, like Lydia does, again argues that knowledge is power, especially in the right hands, and can even grant power to women in spite of Gilead's repressive, male-dominated hierarchy. In this manner, the power that knowledge can grant seems even more powerful than socially gifted power, since Lydia's own influence is able to subvert even Grove's superior position as a man.

After the Particicution, Agnes finds both Lydia and Jade outside her and Becka's door. Lydia has assigned Jade to Becka and Agnes, to live with them and under their care. As Lydia and Jade step into their apartment, Agnes knows the peace they've known for the last nine years in Ardua Hall is now over. She reflects that she and Becka lack the particular ruthlessness of Lydia's generation, those who had lives before Gilead.

Jade's comparative immaturity, which reflects how much less suffering she has endured than Agnes and Becka, parallels Agnes and Becka's comparative lack of ruthlessness that similarly reflects how much less they have suffered than Lydia and her generation of women, who endured the destruction of their past lives and the establishment of Gilead. Jade's entrance into Becka and Agnes's lives also marks a critical turning point for Becka and Agnes, as they will be brought into Lydia's secrecy and plotting.

CHAPTER 48

Agnes reflects on her first days in Ardua Hall, when she and Becka are still children and when Becka shows her around and introduces her to this new world. Agnes has no concept of what a library or a map is, but Becka explains that here they have access to information of all sorts, with the right rank and permission. In Ardua Hall, punishment for breaking the rules is done privately, down in the cellars, rather than in public like the rest of society. As Becka explains, she helps Agnes find an outfit and choose a name for herself, settling on Aunt Victoria.

Agnes's entrance into Ardua Hall represents a critical development in her character arc, where she is encouraged for the first time to learn, educate herself, and utilize all of the capacities of her woman's brain. For Agnes, the fact that she is able and encouraged to learn defies Gilead's teaching that women's brains are naturally less capable or different in any way to men's brains.

Agnes frets about whether she will be allowed to stay beyond her first six months and struggles to learn to read and to be appropriately deferential to the senior Aunts. Becka knows of one girl who, after being punished in the cellars, did not want to become an Aunt but also didn't want to be married. She wanted to go live alone and keep a farm. Vidala claimed this was evidence she had been taught to read before her mind was ready to reject such ideas and locked her in the cellar for a month. When the girl emerged, Vidala announced that she would still be married, but rather than go through with it, the girl drowned herself in the rain cistern on the roof. Agnes thinks this is horrible, but Becka says that "some people don't want to live in any of the ways that are allowed."

Vidala's belief that the dissenting Aunt was given access to the library before the Aunt's mind was strong enough to reject such ideas that did not fit with Gilead suggests that even the Aunts are expected to be sufficiently indoctrinated before they are given access to literature or allowed to see how the outside world operates. This fear that Gilead's women might discover that other people live differently exposes just how dismal and inequitable life in Gilead is for women and demonstrates how a regime might control and repress its people through enforced ignorance.

While Agnes is learning to read, she practices with poems that Vidala wrote about girls seducing men or catching their eyes, and the graphic results of such sins. Becka remarks that she'd never want any attention from a man, even "the Gilead kind of God." Agnes is stunned at this statement, but Becka tells her that Gilead leaves a lot of things out of the Bible, like the fact that both men and women bear God's image. Agnes can see for herself once she's allowed to read it. Agnes is still disturbed by this, though, since Vidala would call it heresy.

Becka's claim that Gilead's idea of God does not fit the Bible's idea of God echoes Agnes's thoughts in Chapter 2 that Gilead is "surely contrary to what God intended." It suggests that Gilead's regime is not Atwood's criticism of Christianity or the Bible in and of themselves, but of the abuse of religious power to establish and support an authoritarian regime, which has happened often throughout history but, according to Becka, does not represent the religion's true aims.

Shunammite visits during Agnes's second month with the Aunts, gloating about her new marriage to Commander Judd and how many Marthas she now has. Agnes realizes that Shunammite now outranks Paula, which must infuriate Paula. Shunammite can tell that Agnes is not altogether pleased to see her, but Agnes insists that's just part of becoming an Aunt.

Shunammite represents a foil to both Becka and Agnes, demonstrating what they could become if they would conform to Gilead's strict gender roles and arranged marriages, and enjoy the status and material benefits that result.

CHAPTER 49

Agnes practices reading and writing with approved Bible verses and hymns, transcribing them with metal nibs and ink or pencils. Writing materials are not easily available in Gilead since women are forbidden writing and few men have any need of it for their jobs. "What else would people be writing about?" As Agnes copies down verses and virtues, she wonders constantly about what she is transcribing and realizes that learning to read and write has not brought answers to her life, only more and more questions.

Gilead seems to fear literacy and creativity even amongst men, which suggests that literature naturally leads one to question their own presuppositions and beliefs, which would threaten an authoritarian religious rule. This is confirmed by the constant questions Agnes has about the virtues and scriptures she's given to transcribe.

The months pass and Agnes learns not only to read, but to pass the other tests of obedience the Aunts dole out, such as washing the same toilet repeatedly even when it is perfectly clean. Even so, she passes her six-month trial and becomes a full Supplicant, which grants her access to Ardua Hall's library and even the Reading Room, where Agnes is assigned a desk and work transcribing Lydia's many sermons. Lydia often passes Agnes's desk on her way to her own locked office, where the real secrets are kept. As months and years pass, Becka and Agnes continue to grow closer and share all of their life's pains and fears with each other, including the events with Crystal and Dr. Grove. They come to see each other as sisters.

Agnes's time in Ardua Hall gives her a newfound sense of agency—despite the emphasis on obedience, Agnes is given real work to do for the first time in her life—and the chance for education. Her growing relationship with Becka also provides her first experience of human warmth and intimacy from someone beyond her immediate family. This suggests that Ardua Hall, removed from the laws and strictures of Gilead, allows Agnes to become a fully realized individual.

CHAPTER 50

After reading "elementary texts" for four years, Agnes is finally allowed to read the Bible. Becka has been reading it for years already, but those who are allowed access to scripture are strictly forbidden from discussing what they read with anyone else. However, before Agnes starts to read, Becka warns her that the Bible doesn't say what Gilead says it does. Agnes discovers that in stories like the Concubine Cut into 12 Pieces, the truth of it is not noble like the Aunts said, but horrific. As Agnes reads and discovers the contradictions of what she was taught and what she reads, she feels as if she may lose her faith, which frightens her. She tells Becka of this fear, and Becka agrees, and claims that a person can either "believe in Gilead or [...] believe in God, but not both."

Not only is Agnes not allowed to read the Bible until living with the Aunts for four years, but Becka, given earlier access, is forbidden from discussing it, suggesting that Gilead abuses and distorts much of what the Bible says, rather than embodying it. The long delay suggests that Agnes must be thoroughly indoctrinated by Gilead's teaching and invested in the regime's purpose, which further suggests that the inconsistency between the actual Bible and Gilead's rendering of it represents a threat to Gilead's control.

CHAPTER 51

Three years later, Agnes discovers a blue folder of papers tucked behind the work assignments left for her at her desk. Opening it, she discovers that it contains evidence and case notes about the death of Commander Saunders, Paula's former husband. The Commander was not murdered by his Handmaid, but by Paula, who was having an affair with Commander Kyle even while Tabitha was alive. Paula framed the Handmaid for the murder, and the Handmaid was tortured for so long that she eventually confessed to the crime she didn't commit, a which point she was hanged. "The Aunts had known the truth."

As with the Dr. Grove's accusation and execution, Paula's framing of the Handmaid for Saunders's murder demonstrates that false testimony is a common occurrence in Gilead. This not only highlights the rampant corruption throughout Gilead's leadership—which thus delegitimizes any claim they make about moral purity or God's will—but further weakens Agnes's former loyalty to Gilead.

Agnes is awestruck by the information, though she cannot fathom why it was given to her. She wonders if this was what Lydia had used against Paula to force her to let Agnes join Ardua Hall. She wonders if this means that Tabitha was murdered as well. Agnes keeps all this to herself, even from Becka, so as not to endanger her. Over the next two years, more and more files appear on Agnes's desk, describing the crimes of people at every level of society except for Aunts and Handmaids.

Lydia's use of her knowledge of Paula's murderous actions to free Agnes not only demonstrates the power that damning knowledge can grant, but also implicitly grants this power to Agnes as well. The fact that none of the files contain evidence against Aunts or Handmaids suggests that the deliverer of such information is intentionally protecting both classes of women.

Commander Judd's file is the thickest and most significant, describing his murder of every one of his numerous wives of the past, creatively killed off through tragic accidents, poisonings, or forced birth complications. Agnes realizes that by becoming an Aunt, she narrowly avoided the same fate. Although the files initially disturb her, and though Agnes does not know why they are given to her, she realizes that this is where the Aunts' power lies: in dirty and dangerous secrets. If Agnes continues to rise through the ranks, this is what she will enter into: power and the possibility for vengeance. The notion is very tempting.

Agnes's realization confirms that even in a male-dominated, ruthlessly oppressive regime, knowledge can grant tremendous power to women or other disempowered individuals. The temptation Agnes feels to use such power for vengeance is understandable, but also disturbing, since it would parallel Gilead's own use of power to dominate or control others, even if Agnes seemed more justified in it.

CHAPTER 52: THE ARDUA HALL HOLOGRAPH

While Lydia is up late writing her manuscript, Vidala suddenly arrives and nearly catches her in the act. Vidala states that she doesn't trust the new Pearl, Jade, and thinks the tattoo on her arm is both ridiculous and blasphemous for associating God with love. In her opinion, Jade should be harshly interrogated, and the tattoo removed, in case she is a Mayday spy. Lydia deflects her suspicions and desire to torture as best she can.

Once again, Vidala's statement that any association between God and love is blasphemous suggests that Gilead is not an embodied representation of Christianity or religion at large, but rather demonstrates the abuse of such religious influence and power to uphold a tyrannical and oppressive regime.

Lydia rushes to meet Commander Judd at his home. Shunammite opens the door and Lydia remarks that she looks very ill. Lydia knows he is poisoning her, so she assures Shunammite that she will convince him to send her to the clinic in Ardua Hall. Lydia finds Judd in his study, a room she has been in many times before both on business and in espionage. Vintage pornography hangs on his wall and his bookshelves, along with many old and long-forbidden pieces of literature.

Judd's possession of pornography and forbidden literature again suggests that Gilead's upper leadership does not hold itself to the same strict moral standards that it espouses to everyone else. This is both hypocritical and particularly egregious, since adultery and sexual misconduct—which pornography would presumably be, in such a Puritanical culture—are described elsewhere as capital offenses.

Lydia explains Vidala's suspicion, which interferes with their own aims. She claims that Vidala should no longer be trusted, for reasons she will not yet reveal. Lydia also requests that Shunammite be transferred to Ardua Hall, and after glaring at each other for a long time, Judd agrees and implies that it would be better for her to die there, away from him, to decrease suspicion.

Lydia's attempt to save Shunammite from the murder that they both know Judd is in the process of committing again demonstrates her boldness and the scope of her own power, through which she will even risk challenging one of the most powerful men in Gilead.

Lydia reflects that she is now "poised on the razor's edge." She must decide between falling headlong into her plan to bring down Gilead, which, if a failure, will see her tortured and executed as a traitor, or betraying Nicole, Becka, and Agnes, possibly to their deaths, but cementing her own legacy as one of the most powerful figures in Gilead. She is not sure which path she will take.

In spite of her vast power and ability to manipulate events, Lydia's moment of pause and indecision demonstrate that she is as flawed as any human, and the desire to simply protect oneself and survive at the expense of other people is as strong for her as anyone else.

CHAPTER 53: TRANSCRIPT OF WITNESS TESTIMONY 369B

Jade's transition into Gilead is very difficult, and she realizes that she truly knows nothing about the country. After the Pearl Girl ceremony, new Pearls are made to kneel in an all-night prayer vigil. One of the new girls cracks and begins crying and screaming, and the Aunts drag her away to turn her into a Handmaid instead. The next day, Jade attends the Particicution in the stadium. Seeing the Handmaids frenzied and covered in blood, holding pieces of two men's bodies in their hands, Jade wonders if her mother ever looked "feral" like this.

Although very little is said or explained about the Handmaids throughout the story, the fact that the girl who broke down mentally was dragged away to be made a Handmaid suggests that Handmaids are primarily composed of women who were for one reason or another deemed to be unfit to serve as wives or Marthas.

CHAPTER 54: TRANSCRIPT OF WITNESS TESTIMONY 369A

Agnes and Becka struggle to train Jade in the right ways to behave. She is constantly loud and belligerent, complaining about the food or speaking ill of the place. Jade says that someday she wants to shave her head, just to see what it's like, which disturbs both Becka and Agnes because "a woman's hair is her glory."

Becka and Agnes's discomfort at the thought of a woman shaving her head demonstrates how entrenched Gilead's gender norms are in their own psyches, as well has how little Jade regards such societal expectations, highlighting the divide between their respective worlds.

CHAPTER 55: TRANSCRIPT OF WITNESS TESTIMONY 369B

Jade doesn't think that Becka or Agnes like her, though they're the only people she has for company in Gilead. She misses Ada and Elijah and especially Garth, and wonders if Garth is dating anyone. Jade is especially anxious about their supposed source in Gilead, since they still haven't made contact with her and she's not even sure if they actually exist.

Jade's feeling of being alone in Gilead reiterates how much of a risk she's taken to infiltrate and meet a source who may not even exist, which would leave her stranded and subject to Gilead's repressive lifestyle.

CHAPTER 56: TRANSCRIPT OF WITNESS TESTIMONY 369A

Agnes and Becka find Jade very untidy: she leaves her clothes lying around, she showers at "unauthorized" hours of the day until strongly told she must not, and her tattoo seems blasphemous. Agnes and Becka often hear loud thumping coming from Jade's upstairs bedroom. When Agnes finally asks what she is doing, Jade explains that she's exercising. Becka does not think that women need strong bodies, only men do, but Jade says women do, too, in case a man ever tries to force himself on her. She shows them how to throw a heartstopper punch. Both Becka and Agnes are worried by this, since hitting a man is strictly forbidden and if a woman is raped, she is partially to blame for enticing the man. Jade gives up the discussion but keeps working out.

Jade's concept of personal safety, capability, and self-defense are entirely different from Becka and Agnes's concept of such things, which highlights the disparity between their respective worlds. Jade's belief that women should be strong and ready to fight any man who tries to take advantage reflects the comparative empowerment she's experienced throughout her life. Becka and Agnes's belief that they are to blame if any man tries to assault them reflects their deeply-entrenched belief in their own low value, even though they are growing and expanding in their roles as Aunts.

As Agnes continues to read the criminal files that appear on her desk, she wonders if her "soft, muddy brain" is beginning to harden like a man's. This both excites and disturbs her. However, Agnes still does not have access to the genealogical archives where she could learn who her true mother is, and will not until after her missionary service as a Pearl Girl.

Agnes's reflection on the state of her brain suggests that, despite learning to do all of the things that men do, her upbringing which taught her to view her own brain as less capable and powerful still has a major effect on her view of herself. This demonstrates the harmful effect of strictly enforced gender roles on a person's psyche and self-concept.

One day, Agnes's family's genealogical record appears on her desk instead of a crime file. Agnes opens the genealogical file and finds her own record tucked in a separate file behind the rest of the family, since she is not a blood relative of any of them. She finds a picture of her birth mother, though the name is redacted, and beneath it the notations tell Agnes that she is a Mayday operative at large in Canada. Two unsuccessful assassination attempts have been made on her mother's life. There is a picture of her father as well, his name also redacted, with notes that claim he is possibly a Mayday terrorist as well, though it is not known for sure. Agnes places her hand on her mother's picture.

Although Agnes did love Tabitha, her first glimpse of her biological mother's picture suggests that her absence left a hole in Agnes's life that even Tabitha could not fill. The contrast between Agnes's legal parents and her biological parents is striking—where once she believed she was the daughter of Gilead's elite, now she discovers that she is the daughter of Mayday rebels, a group that is hated and feared in Gilead.

There is another page in Agnes's file that informs her that she has a sister: Baby Nicole. There is a handwritten note attached that says Nicole is somewhere in Gilead, still at large. Agnes is overwhelmed, partly with gratitude but also with the gravity and danger of the situation. She's assumed that Lydia is the one giving her these files, but she does not understand why. Looking around first, Agnes folds the picture of her mother into her robe and takes it with her out of the Reading Room.

Agnes's implicit understanding that such information is extremely dangerous reiterates the manner in which Gilead limits information as much as possible and enforces its citizens' ignorance, especially that of women. Such secrecy and enforced ignorance are marks of totalitarian regimes, such the free flow of information represents a threat to the regime's narrative.

CHAPTER 57: TRANSCRIPT OF WITNESS TESTIMONY 369B

One morning after breakfast, Lydia summons Jade to her office and reveals herself as the source. She advises Jade to be careful with her words but recognizes that Jade is Nicole and that it is time for them to set their plan in motion. Lydia makes an incision in the "O" in "God" on Jade's tattoo and inserts a small disk into it, explaining that if Jade is ever caught, they'll never think to pry into "God." She announces that Jade is now a "carrier pigeon," and their next task is getting her out of Gilead.

Lydia's use of Gilead's religious severity—hiding the information cache in "God"—to evade detection suggests that, unlike Vidala, Lydia herself does not share the religious beliefs, or at least not the religious fervor. She shows no compunction at all about defacing the "God" tattoo for achieving her aims.

CHAPTER 58: TRANSCRIPT OF WITNESS TESTIMONY 369A

Agnes and Becka are summoned to Lydia's office at the same time, and they both assume they are meant to report on Jade's progress as a convert. However, when they arrive, Jade is already in Lydia's office, sitting on a stool. Agnes notices that Lydia looks older and frailer, which she'd once thought impossible. Lydia reveals that Baby Nicole is in Gilead, and that she is Agnes's sister. Becka is both thrilled and pained by this news, since now Agnes has biological family while she herself does not. However, when Lydia announces that Jade is Nicole, Becka is even more crestfallen. Agnes is in shock but makes a polite show of gratitude for Jade's sake.

Becka's disappointment that Jade is Baby Nicole in the flesh suggests that Becka had expected such an icon to be a paragon of grace and virtue. Although understandable, this only emphasizes the manner in which, by making Baby Nicole into a symbolic icon, both the people of Gilead and Canada's anti-Gilead protesters dehumanized Nicole, the actual person, for their own purposes. In treating Baby Nicole as an icon, neither side recognized her as an actual person, an individual with agency and personality that might not suit the symbol.

Lydia announces that they need to get Nicole out of Gilead and back to Canada, which floors both Agnes and Becka, since such an action would be "treason ten times over." Lydia argues, however, that as they've both seen in the crime files—Becka has secretly been receiving them as well—Gilead's leadership is fully corrupt, and this new task serves the women of Gilead in the greatest possible way, though it certainly is treachery. Lydia says they can make their own choice as to whether to participate or not, though if they don't, they will still be punished for the dangerous information they now possess. Nicole calls this "emotional blackmail" but Lydia is unmoved, and leaves Agnes and Becka alone to decide.

Although Lydia presents Becka and Agnes with the choice of whether or not to participate in her plot, it is only the illusion *of a choice, since they have been given too much information already and would likely be arrested and killed. In this manner, although it is for an arguably greater good, Lydia's involvement of Becka and Nicole without giving them a real choice echoes the behavior of Gilead's regime, suggesting that even those with ultimately good intentions may still be guilty of robbing women of their right to choose.*

After their meeting, Becka returns to her work in the Reading Room while Agnes and Nicole go back to their apartment. Agnes shows Nicole the picture she stole of their mother. Nicole is thankful to see it but after gazing at it decides it is too dangerous to keep, so they tear the pages up and flush them in the toilet. At Aunt Lydia's direction, all three of them carry on with their work as usual, though Agnes wonders if she and Becka will still undertake their mission as Pearl Girls soon. Less than a week before they are set to be sent on their mission, Lydia tells them that Becka will not go on her mission right away, but that Nicole will go to Canada posing as a Pearl Girl with Agnes in her stead. Lydia claims Becka will follow after, but Agnes suspects this to be a lie.

Again, although the situation arguably demands it, Lydia pulls both Becka and Agnes into a very dangerous scheme that will permanently change their lives without their consent. This again depicts Lydia as a less-than-heroic figure, although her goals are certainly noble. Agnes's suspicion that Lydia is lying when she says that Becka will escape to Canada after Agnes and Nicole make it out safely suggests not only that Lydia is hiding something, but that Becka will not escape with her life as Lydia claims.

CHAPTER 59: ARDUA HALL HOLOGRAPH

Lydia had thought her plan would go unhindered, but Vidala accosts her again one morning after breakfast. Vidala is deeply concerned about Aunt Immortelle (Becka) and Aunt Victoria (Agnes) undertaking their Pearl Girl missions at such a young age. She is particularly skeptical of Aunt Victoria and believes she may pose a flight risk in Canada. Lydia tries to console Vidala, but Vidala is insistent, especially since she saw Victoria reading her own genealogical file. Agnes's biological mother is notorious for helping Baby Nicole escape and now works as a Mayday operative. Lydia assures Vidala that Victoria and Immortelle will prove themselves virtuous and pure on their mission, but Vidala gives a suspicious half-smile.

Aunt Vidala's knowledge of Agnes reading her family's genealogical file implies that she knows something of Lydia's plot. As with Commander Judd, Lydia and Vidala are locked in a precarious balance of power, a contest of information and misinformation in an effort to discredit and destroy each other. These contests of power reflect the contests of power that actual authoritarian regimes are plagued with, and often toppled by.

Aunt Helena arrives next, also reporting that Victoria was seen reading her own genealogical file, which Helena also knows to contain dangerous information about Victoria's mother and the fact that Baby Nicole is Victoria's half-sister. Lydia assures her that she already knows and says that Vidala may be the one who gave Victoria access to the file. She surmises that Mayday has Baby Nicole in their possession and may be trying to reunite Baby Nicole with her infamous mother. Lydia assigns Helena the task of observing Vidala's movements, watching for any more signs of treachery.

Once again, Lydia's loyalties are vague at best, as she reveals true information about Mayday's secret plan while furthering her own, playing both sides of the conflict in a bid to conceal her own machinations. This furthers Lydia's characterization as a complex and morally ambiguous character, an anti-hero who uses questionable, even villainous means to achieve a righteous goal.

In the afternoon, Elizabeth frantically reports to Lydia that Eyes and Angels have invaded Ardua Hall, completely unauthorized. Lydia is greatly alarmed, and as she is striding out to deal with it runs into Commander Judd. Lydia is angry, but Judd explains that they have discovered that microdots were being smuggled on the brochures produced by Ardua Hall's print shop, though they don't yet know who the source is. Aunt Lydia expresses her disbelief and says that all of the Founders should be investigated, including herself, though Judd seems not to suspect her. However, he feels that they must reveal Baby Nicole to the world sooner than planned as a symbolic show of power. He will marry her himself. He asks after Shunammite, now in the clinic, and Lydia answers that she is recovering, though may soon have a sudden relapse.

Commander Judd and the Eyes' unauthorized invasion of Ardua Hall suggests that the balance of power between Judd and Lydia is tipping. Judd is becoming bolder in his willingness to openly defy Lydia and act aggressively towards her, even if he does not realize she is behind the plot he is investigating. Under such circumstances, with the Aunts—and thus women—threatened with losing their last sanctuary from men's influence and domination in Gilead, the execution of Lydia's plan seems even more necessary.

CHAPTER 60: TRANSCRIPT OF WITNESS TESTIMONY 369A

Lydia rushes into Becka and Agnes's apartment and announces that there is an emergency. She says that Judd has discovered Nicole's true identity and wants to marry her soon, so they must hatch their plan tonight. Lydia will have their clothing, passports, and Pearl Girl dresses ready for Nicole and Agnes by tonight, but Becka must hide herself for 48 hours, since there will not be enough time to arrange an escape for her as well. Though this will be a tremendous risk for Becka, everything else depends on her. Nicole will write a note claiming that she eloped with a maintenance man and escaped over the Wall to buy them some time.

Again, rather than telling Nicole, Agnes, and Becka the truth, Lydia lies to them by telling them that Judd has just learned Baby Nicole is in Gilead, depicting her as a morally ambiguous character with loyalty to nobody but herself. Once again, Becka is faced with little choice on whether or not to accept her role. However, this time, Becka's loss of choice is for the sake of saving her friends, suggesting that one may have to set aside their own personal agency and freedom for the sake of others.

Lydia arrives in the evening with everything bundled in a bag and gives Agnes and Nicole a map, passwords, and instructions to be outside to meet their driver early the next morning. However, Lydia also warns them that Aunt Vidala likes to walk the grounds in the morning. If they run into her, Nicole will need to hit her.

Nicole's physical training, which disturbed Becka and Agnes, immediately has its usefulness, suggesting that Nicole's belief in women's need to learn self-defense and develop the power to fight is fully justified, even if it does not fit into Gilead's traditional gender roles.

Nicole writes the elopement note and goes to bed, while Agnes and Becka sit up with each other. Agnes worries for Becka, since she'll surely be caught and hurt, and wishes she did not have to leave her behind, but Becka is firm that this is the only possible way. Becka determines that she'll hide in the cistern on the roof, but Agnes worries that this is too dangerous. Agnes tells Becka that she is a "true sister" to her, and they each tell each other that they love each other, and have only ever loved each other.

Although Becka has little choice in the matter, she sets aside her own demand for personal agency and accepts her fate—even though it will certainly lead to arrest, torture, and death—in order to help her friends, demonstrating that a person may voluntarily sacrifice their personal agency and power to choose for the sake of a greater good and other people. In the midst of their concurrent struggles, Becka and Agnes find real love and familial intimacy from each other, even though Gilead tried to deny it from them, which is itself an act of resistance.

CHAPTER 61

Nicole and Agnes set out the following morning and, as Lydia warned, happen upon Aunt Vidala. Aunt Vidala realizes something is amiss right away and tries to grab Nicole by the fake pearls of her Pearl Girl outfit, breaking the string which falls to the ground. Nicole delivers a heartstopper punch and Vidala falls to the ground, white-skinned and motionless. Agnes worries that they killed her, but Nicole says there is no time to wait, and they continue and meet their driver, climbing into his car. Agnes fears Nicole will "misstep" and get them both arrested.

Nicole's ability to defend them and fight Vidala contradicts Gilead's beliefs about traditional gender roles, again demonstrating that women can do anything that men can do just as well. However, in spite of Nicole's ability to fight, Agnes's fear that Nicole will "misstep" suggests that she does not fit well into Gilead's society and may reveal their true identities through her unfeminine behavior.

CHAPTER 62: TRANSCRIPT OF WITNESS TESTIMONY 369B

Nicole worries to herself that she may have killed Aunt Vidala with the punch. The "O" on her forearm where Lydia inserted the microdot itches and doesn't seem to be healing well. The car passes through several Angel checkpoints, but the driver, one of Lydia's men, does all the talking and they get through without fuss. Agnes and Nicole are still terse with each other, but Nicole tries to make peace by saying she's "glad to have a sister," and Agnes agrees.

Nicole's itching arm where the information cache was inserted hints that she will have trouble with it in the future. Meanwhile, the tension between Agnes and Nicole underscores how different they are and how different their lives have been, despite the fact that they are biological sisters.

The driver drops Agnes and Nicole off at a bus station in New Hampshire, and they board the bus with the tickets Lydia supplied them when it arrives. Although it is all lower-class people on the bus, they warmly salute Agnes and Nicole in their Pearl Girls uniforms, as do the Angels at the intermittent checkpoints. One of who tells them they're "very brave, heading into Sodom." The further north they get, the less friendly people gradually seem toward them, until they and their uniforms are met with plain scowls. Nicole realizes that Gilead's support must be swiftly waning in the outer regions. They are both feeling anxious and jittery, but Nicole reminds Agnes to look serene.

The Angel's description of the outside world as "Sodom" is a reference to the cities Sodom and Gomorrah in the Old Testament, which God destroyed for the cities' apparent wickedness. The Angel's use of such a word not only suggests that Gilead's people are taught to see the rest of the world as morally bankrupt, but also demonstrates the manner in which religious stories and imagery can be used to uphold an authoritarian regime. However, the general derision that the Pearl Girl uniforms elicit from people farther into the rural countryside suggests that in the outlying territories, Gilead's citizens openly despise the regime.

In the late afternoon Agnes and Nicole get off the bus in a shabby, broken little town. They enter an old convenience store and sit at the counter. The man behind it looks annoyed by their uniforms. However, when Agnes offers the two passwords, the man's countenance changes and he shows them to a backroom where he has new clothes—jeans, plaid jackets, hats—and transportation waiting for them. He tells them to leave all of their old gear in their Pearl Girls backpacks, and he'll dispose of them himself. With normal clothes on, Nicole starts to feel back in her element once again.

The change of clothes from Pearl Girl dresses to jeans and jackets denotes the transition from one world to another, and Nicole's comfort at wearing modern clothing suggests that she feels at ease once more now that they are re-entering the modern, democratic world that she understands and leaving the strange world of Gilead behind, which demanded strict gender norm adherence and women's submissiveness.

CHAPTER 63: TRANSCRIPT OF WITNESS TESTIMONY 369A

Agnes finds the clothing of the outside world disturbing and thinks that the underwear feels "slippery and depraved." Although Nicole assures her that she is wearing women's jeans, Agnes believes that all jeans are men's clothing and that she is committing "gender treachery," which is a capital offense in Gilead. They meet the man outside and climb into a pickup truck with him, and he drives them away into the falling darkness. Agnes falls asleep and dreams that Becka is there as well, sitting in the truck beside her.

Agnes's disgust at wearing "modern" clothing is the opposite of Nicole's reaction, and thus denotes that Agnes is leaving behind the world she understands, is comparatively comfortable in, and entering a world which is entirely foreign to her. Her reflection on "gender treachery" being a capital offense suggests that Gilead treats breaking its strict gender norms as an unforgivable crime.

CHAPTER 64: TRANSCRIPT OF WITNESS TESTIMONY 369B

They arrive at a river with a small electric motorboat waiting for them. Nicole wakes Agnes and they make their way down the bank. Although Agnes is many years older, Nicole feels like the older sister in that moment, as she realizes they are entering the world with which she is familiar and which Agnes knows nothing about. They climb aboard the small vessel that takes them down the Penobscot River. The driver remarks that people this far out hate the Eyes, so no one will snoop on them even if they are spotted in the dark. Before long, they reach their final vessel, a larger boat called the *Nellie J. Banks*, waiting for them beyond the mouth of the river.

The transition between worlds causes the roles to effectively reverse between the older and young sister, suggesting that such roles are in part signified by one's level of experience in the world and ability to make their way. The larger boat is named after a famous Canadian schooner that smuggled alcohol during the prohibition era—such vessels were known as "rum-runners"—in Nova Scotia in the early 20th century, which suggests that it is a boat used for smuggling.

CHAPTER 65: THE ARDUA HALL HOLOGRAPH

Gardeners find Aunt Vidala lying behind Aunt Lydia's statue, alive but comatose. Everyone assumes that she had a stroke. Lydia visits Vidala's body in the intensive care unit in Ardua Hall and considers cutting off her oxygen supply then and there but decides that Vidala will likely die on her own.

Although Lydia is ruthless, her decision not to murder Vidala suggests that she has a certain amount of restraint and conscience as well, and would rather refrain from potentially unnecessary killing.

During lunch, Aunt Helena notices that Victoria and Immortelle are missing, but Lydia mentions that they said they'd be fasting and praying. However, when Helena also notices that Jade is missing, she goes to their apartment to check and finds Jade's note explaining that she has eloped with a plumber. When she reports this to Lydia, Lydia surmises that as young and strong as Jade was, she most likely climbed over the Wall.

Since the Wall is a symbol of Gilead's power and authoritarian control, the idea that Jade climbed over the Wall suggests that she has subverted Gilead's control in her desire to exercise her own personal agency and choose a lover for herself. Even though Jade did not truly climb the Wall, her escape to Canada with dangerous information nonetheless represents a subversion of Gilead's power.

CHAPTER 66: TRANSCRIPT OF WITNESS TESTIMONY 369B

Nicole and Agnes climb aboard the larger ship and are met by Captain Mishimengo, an old friend of Ada's. Mishimengo explains that they're smugglers under the pretense of being cod fishermen, and they have good relationships with all the coast guard officials in the area. He shows them where they can sleep below deck, in long metal boxes with sleeping bags in them, and gives them some food. As Nicole falls asleep, she notices that her arm is feeling worse and wonders if she has an infection. The next morning, she feels very ill and bickers with Agnes over whether or not Gilead can truly be saved, or whether it should simply be reduced to rubble, which offends Agnes since it's still her home.

Nicole and Agnes's disagreement on whether or not Gilead should be utterly destroyed or hopefully reformed to some better version of itself is only briefly touched on. But Agnes's argument that Gilead is still her home raises a major point. Although Gilead is depicted as a villainous and oppressive regime, most of the people who live there—or in any such regime—did not ask to live under such oppression and are just trying to survive. This suggests that such a flippant attitude as Nicole's, that the entire place should be destroyed, is immature and does not account for all the innocent people who would suffer as a result.

CHAPTER 67: TRANSCRIPT OF WITNESS TESTIMONY 369A

Agnes worries about Nicole; she has a steadily rising fever and seems weak. As Agnes climbs the ladder to speak with the captain, she realizes that her jeans make movement and especially climbing far easier than it would've been in her Gilead skirt. She can tell Mishimengo is anxious about this plan, since he himself is an escaped citizen of Gilead, and if they're caught, he'll be charged with "woman-smuggling" and executed.

Agnes's realization that she is freer to move and climb in jeans, even though they disgusted her before, works as a brief but poignant symbol for the manner in which strict gender roles can unnecessarily restrict a woman's ability to act and exert themselves, and freeing oneself of them thus allows a greater degree of freedom and autonomy.

Nicole's fever gets worse and she refuses to eat, so Agnes prays for her recovery. However, while she is doing this, Captain Mishimengo tells Agnes that their motor is failing. They're in Canadian waters but not close to their destination, and once the tide turns, they'll be swept out to sea. Mishimengo has to drop Agnes and Nicole where they are in an inflatable dinghy, and they have to go now, even though it's night. As long as they reach the shore, they'll be safely in Canada.

Although certainly dangerous, Agnes and Nicole have been primarily passive participants in their own escape thus far, shuttled from one person to the next. The need for them to now row themselves to safety suggests that they will take the last leg of their journey into their own hands and succeed or fail by their own efforts and agency.

They climb down into the inflatable, which Nicole has experience operating but Agnes is useless in, and push off. Nicole uses their small electric motor to guide them toward shore, but the battery shorts and dies. Agnes wonders if they should jump overboard, since it would be better to die than be taken back to Gilead. Nicole frantically tries to teach Agnes how to row with one of the oars, since her arm is too swollen and painful to use both, but Agnes feels overwhelmed by it all.

Once again, although Nicole is younger than Agnes by several years, her capability—which defies Gilead's gendered expectations and thus argues against any strict gender norms—places her in the role of the older sister rather than the younger. Agnes's contemplation of suicide to avoid being arrested and imprisoned echoes Becka's previous suicide attempt to avoid the prison of unwanted wedlock.

CHAPTER 68: THE ARDUA HALL HOLOGRAPH

Aunt Vidala has awoken but cannot yet speak, and Lydia knows that Vidala will already understand that she is behind the entire plot. Meanwhile, rumor has it that Vidala's brief coma was not the result of a stroke but some sort of attack, since there are marks of a struggle in the soil where she was found. Angels have been sent to search for Jade and the eloping plumber in the nearby vicinity, but have found nothing, and Elizabeth grows more suspicious by the hour of the entire situation, though does not yet suspect Lydia.

All of the circumstances enclosing on Lydia suggest that her days are numbered; she will soon be found out to be the plotting traitor that she is. Although Lydia decided to exercise restraint and not murder Vidala when she had the chance, the new threat that Vidala poses suggests that in such situations, the most moral option is not necessarily the best one.

Commander Judd is both enraged and terrified that Baby Nicole has escaped, since his and Lydia's reputations will be ruined if word gets out, making them both very vulnerable before the Council. Meanwhile a maintenance crew has found Aunt Immortelle's body floating in the cistern. She took her outer garments and carefully folded them so that someone else could make use of them in the future. Lydia is saddened by her suicide, by maintains to herself that it was Becka's willing sacrifice.

Becka's suicide to avoid being arrested and tortured parallels her suicide attempt to avoid being imprisoned in a forced marriage and represents her final assertion of her own agency. Becka's decision to choose to die rather than be passively imprisoned suggests her personal agency and power to choose was more important to her than life itself. Though hardly mentioned and never explained, Judd's fear of the Council suggests that even he answers to someone else.

Word arrives that two Pearl Girls were spotted making their way through New Hampshire, seemingly headed for Canada, and most realize that this must be Aunt Victoria and Jade. Judd sends his operatives to hunt for them, authorizing them to shoot both girls down if they try to escape. Confronting Lydia, Judd also realizes that Nicole was sent into Gilead as an operative, but Lydia continues to feign ignorance and accepts her responsibility for failing to see through the Mayday plot. Lydia has a brief flashback of when she stood in the stadium, brown-robed, and raised her rifle. She is sure there was a bullet in her rifle, despite what Judd said.

Judd's determination that the escaped girls should be shot rather than let escape suggests that he has no care for their well-being whatsoever, but rather is motivated primarily be fear of what public knowledge of Nicole's escape would do to his and Gilead's reputation. Lydia's flashback and certainty that her rifle fired a bullet suggests that she is taking personal responsibility for all of the deaths she has caused in her time, including Becka's—and Agnes and Nicole's, should they fail to reach Canada.

Lydia revisits Vidala and finds Elizabeth sitting by her bedside. She sends Elizabeth briefly away for a cup of tea and wakes Vidala once she is alone with her. Vidala opens her eyes and whispers clearly that she knows Lydia is behind everything, and that she'll see her hanged. Vidala falls back asleep. When Elizabeth returns, Lydia tells her that Vidala accused Elizabeth of attacking her. Elizabeth is mortified, but Lydia suggests that they can still fix this, and implies that as soon as she leaves, Elizabeth should smother Vidala with her pillow. It will look like an asthma attack. As she leaves, Lydia thinks of Agnes and Nicole on the run, her "destroying angels."

Once again, Lydia demonstrates her own ruthlessness not only by killing Vidala, but by implicating Elizabeth in her murder so as to have better control over her. This again characterizes Lydia as a complex protagonist, an anti-hero who achieves a noble goal through vicious means. Her consideration of Agnes and Nicole as her "destroying angels" suggests that like Nicole, Lydia ultimately expects that Gilead's entire regime must fall.

CHAPTER 69: TRANSCRIPT OF WITNESS TESTIMONY 369A

Agnes feels like they've been in the inflatable for hours, rowing for their lives. She feels certain that they will die, tipped by a wave into the ocean. When she feels as if she cannot row any longer, Nicole yells at her to keep moving anyway. They can hear a large wave approaching them and Nicole shouts, but before it hits them, they hear the sound of gravel beneath the raft. The wave throws them from the inflatable into shallow water and they drag themselves onto the shore.

Once again, although Agnes is the older sister by many years, Nicole's far greater confidence and capability suggests that, unhindered by such restrictive gender roles her whole life, Nicole was able to develop much further in her abilities to adapt and survive than Agnes ever had the ability to do, thus arguing that the absence of strict gender roles allows an individual to grow and thrive to a much greater degree.

CHAPTER 70: TRANSCRIPT OF WITNESS TESTIMONY 369B

Nicole thought they were going to die, but they made it. She is proud of Agnes in that moment for persevering and feels that they truly are sisters for the first time. Agnes supports her as they make their way up the slippery rocks. Nicole is delirious and feels as if her infected arm is no longer a part of her body, just a piece of flesh attached by the skin. As she stumbles onward, Nicole hears Becka beside them, encouraging her to press on. Lights shine over a ridge ahead of them and voices approach. Ada, holding a flashlight, comes down to them and Garth scoops Nicole up in his arms. At the top of the hill, TV cameramen are waiting for them. Nicole falls unconscious.

Although Nicole and Agnes formerly were terse and rather disconnected from each other, their newfound closeness suggests that shared suffering and difficult experiences can create intimacy and affection between individuals. Notably, Nicole, though delirious from fever, seems to feel this same newfound affection for Becka as well, seemingly because she knows that Becka faced danger and sacrifice for their sakes even if she did so alone in Gilead.

Nicole and Agnes are airlifted to a medical station for refugees, where doctors load Nicole up with antibiotics. When she awakes in a hospital bed, her arm is less swollen and painful. Agnes is sitting next to her, and Ada, Elijah, and Garth are there as well. Ada and Elijah tell Nicole that she and Agnes are on every news station, and that the cache of information that Lydia sent with them is being broadcast all over the world. Gilead hasn't fallen yet, but it's starting to, despite the news there saying, "it's all fake." Nicole asks where Becka is, but Agnes gingerly reminds her that Becka didn't escape with them. Nicole insists that she was there with them on the beach.

Gilead's early signs of ruin suggests that knowledge truly is power, as Lydia believed, and that the simple truth of Gilead's horrific practices and rampant corruption are the most effective weapons with which to fight it or any authoritarian power's domination. Gilead's news organization arguing that the damning evidence is faked seems to be a nod to America's news environment since 2016, in which politicians and public figures attempt to dispute stories and change public record by simply claiming anything that casts them in a poor light is "fake news."

Nicole falls asleep again, but when she awakes her mother is there waiting for her, looking like an older version of the picture from the genealogical archives. She's crying, and Nicole thinks that she looks both "sad and happy." Nicole and Agnes's mother leans down and hugs both of them in her arms, and Nicole thinks that she has the right smell and feel that seems nearly familiar. She doesn't have any memories of her mother from her childhood, but now she can make them.

Nicole's feeling that the mother who meets her in the hospital smells right and feels right hearkens back to her earlier feelings that, although Neil and Melanie loved her, they never quite felt right as her parents. This suggests that in spite of love, there is some sort of biological bond that undeniably connects mothers with their children.

CHAPTER 71: THE ARDUA HALL HOLOGRAPH

Lydia bids her final farewell to the reader. She wonders if the reader will cherish these pages or burn them. Hopefully, a historian will find them and share them with the world in an unflinching account of Lydia's character, good and bad. She pictures her reader as a sharp young woman, poring over the pages until she despises Lydia, as historians and biographers often come to do with their subjects.

Lydia's hope that her reader will be a bright young woman, a historian perhaps, speaks to her hope that women will regain the freedom in the future to pursue their professional lives and to use the full capacities of their minds to think, aspire, and impress, unhindered by Gilead's conservative and restrictive gender roles.

As she writes her last words, Lydia can hear the boots coming down the hall. The Eyes are coming for her, no doubt. Her work is already complete. Though she will not see Gilead fall herself, the events are set in motion. She will hide her manuscript in a heretical Catholic text, where it is least likely to be found, and end herself with an injection of morphine. "In my end is my beginning."

Lydia's choice to kill herself rather than be captured echoes Becka's own choice to do the same. The act signifies that Lydia wants to make one final assertion of her own personal agency now that her work is done, rather than be imprisoned and subjected to the will of men.

EPILOGUE: THE THIRTEENTH SYMPOSIUM

After some opening remarks, Professor James Darcy Pieixoto gives a keynote address at the Thirteenth Symposium on Gileadean Studies in Maine in June 2197 on "daily life in a Puritan theocracy." The professor gives an overview of the accounts by Aunt Lydia, Agnes, and Nicole, and his reasons for believing that they are all factual—though he admits Aunt Lydia's could possibly be a fabrication. Pieixoto also reveals that after the document cache was released, Gilead experienced a massive purge of much of its leadership, followed by a military coup, a series of local rebellions, and numerous sabotaging strikes coordinated by Mayday operatives.

Pieixoto is a recurring character from The Handmaid's Tale, who served the same purpose as does here: provided a far-removed, historical glimpse at the events of the story a century and a half after they took place. Primarily, Pieixoto's account serves to verify that Gilead did indeed fall over the subsequent decades, implicitly suggesting that any such authoritarian regime will eventually fall; there is hope to be had even in the face of horrific oppression.

Pieixoto goes on to explain that he believes Agnes and Nicole's mother to be Offred, the Handmaid who left behind her account of her escape from Gilead decades before, though it's only conjecture. However, after he and his team of university students tracked down a New Hampshire woman whose great-grandfather told her stories about smuggling women down the river in his boat, they found more clues that lead them to believe that Agnes, Nicole, and Lydia's accounts are truthful.

Although never mentioned in the story itself, the revelation that Offred, the main character of The Handmaid's Tale, is also Agnes and Nicole's biological mother connects that story with its sequel—and confirms to readers of the original story that she did survive and escape Gilead—without letting Offred's presence dominate the story in any way.

Lastly, and somewhat mysteriously, they discovered a statue, dated several decades after Gilead fell, of a young woman in a Pearl Girls outfit with two birds on her shoulder, and an engraving at its base dedicating the statue to Becka, Aunt Immortelle, from her sisters Agnes and Nicole, and their respective families, to honor her work and sacrifice along with that of "A.L."

The statue of Becka, presumably commissioned by Agnes and Nicole, affirms Becka as their own sister, thus offering Becka the chance to belong to their family even though she has passed away. The two birds on her shoulder represent Agnes and Nicole, while the "A.L." presumably refers to Aunt Lydia, honoring her own sacrifice, though not praising or honoring her to the same extent as Becka.

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